

# Exploring Systemic Positioning in Everyday Conversations in Communities: An Embodied Reflexive Inquiry

Helen Mahaffey

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# **Systemic Openings**

## **Exploring Systemic Positioning in Everyday Conversations in Communities: An Embodied Reflexive Inquiry**

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**University of Bedfordshire**

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# **Systemic Openings**

## **Exploring Systemic Positioning in Everyday Conversations in Communities: An Embodied Reflexive Inquiry**

### **Abstract**

This is a systemic practice doctorate where research is undertaken through a social and relational constructionist lens (McNamee and Hosking, 2012) under a broader umbrella of systemic qualitative research practice. A philosophical orientation to inquiry is taken, offering a way of exploring encounters, and specifically conversations in practice, in an embodied relational and dialogical way from within the experience. This locates me as an active participant alongside other active participants, and self- and relational reflexivity feature centrally within a systemic approach to practice and inquiry.

The specific inquiry focus is on embodied, reflexive processes as I engage with others in everyday conversations on issues that matter to different professional and non-professional individuals and community groups; it is a complex ecology. Systemic, embodied, relational concepts are explored through a lens that sees inquiry as philosophically informed. This acknowledges the professional, personal and multiple contexts that inform both the doing and being in each conversation within practice and inquiry. The multi-versa of individuals and groups, professional and non-professional are examined through attention to moments of conversation portrayed through vignettes and dialogical excerpts. I try to capture a sense of the living dynamic of each of the interactions through attention to my multi-vocal inner dialogue and the multiplicity of felt experiences within these conversations where I am moved, stirred, unsettled and fully embodied: I become the case study in the ebbs and flows of this experience.

How I inform these processes, and how I am informed by the responses of others, comes under close scrutiny. Attention is given to reciprocal responses, my internal dialogue, as I respond to what has gone before, external moves within these relational unfolding conversational encounters, how the conversation is experienced by those involved, and how we move on together.

This inquiry focuses on embodied relational processes within the multiple complex dynamic of these conversations, unpacking our ways of 'going on' together (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Autoethnography (Finlay, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Etherington, 2004), self- and relational reflexivity (1992), Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce, 1994), and the process of writing itself are some of the concepts employed to enter this complexity. The unique additional inquiry tool introduced, alongside these, is the personal metaphor of rock climbing. This is chosen because of the fit I consider it has within a conceptual frame of relational embodiment, emphasising the 'I', a systemic practitioner and climber, as an embodied being with other embodied beings in conversation. I enter this process of inquiry with openness to enable change and to be changed, and I hope to challenge some established ideas about research.

I consider the extent to which the metaphor illuminates embodied, self- and relationally reflexive processes in the context of systemic inquiry. The usefulness and application of this metaphor is tested as an embodied reflexive tool. I explore whether ways of thinking about and understanding embodied relational and dynamic processes can be extended. New features that come to light in the process of this inquiry are explored and the insights that may emerge, along with possible contributions to systemic inquiry and practice, are considered. The wider use of metaphors emerging through the dialogue that people offer to describe experience and to capture a sense of lived moments opens further potential for new learning. The reflexive scope and use of metaphor generally is discussed at the end, along with personal and professional learning from the process of writing and inquiry.

I propose a new lens to reflexive inquiry that is suited to systemic practice, embodied reflexive inquiry in which I draw attention to embodied reflexive detailed features within interactions between people. This has wide-ranging applications in systemic and other contexts, including community settings, systemic therapy, training and supervision and across different professional networks, and is explored here. My hope is that this inquiry will add to the growing field of systemic inquiry texts.

**Keywords:** *Systemic practice, inquiry, self- and relational reflexivity, embodiment, openness, process.*

## **Dedication**

*To mum who has kept me grounded in life, love and laughter,  
and dad whose presence I have felt every step of the way*

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- b) The inquiry is original or novel
- c) The inquiry is innovative and bold
- d) The inquiry makes a substantive contribution to the field of systemic practice and systemic inquiry, to members of the public, other professionals, communities or organisations
- e) The inquiry is ethical
- f) The inquiry demonstrates rigour
- g) The inquiry shows reflexivity
- h) As an inquirer I talk from lived experience and practice relationships rather than 'about' others.
- i) The inquiry shows a thoughtful consideration of power relations
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- c) The inquiry is innovative and bold
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- e) The inquiry is ethical
- f) The inquiry demonstrates rigour
- g) The inquiry shows reflexivity
- h) The inquiry demonstrates that as a researcher I talk from lived experience and practice relationships rather than 'about' others
- i) The inquiry shows a thoughtful consideration of power relations, differences in lived experience, belonging and identity and how these matters play out in both the area of professional practice inquiry and how research relationships are demonstrated in the research
- j) The inquiry shows transformation in the researcher's thinking and practice
- k) The presentation of the research has aesthetic merit

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE IN SYSTEMIC PRACTICE at the University of Bedfordshire. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

Name of candidate: Helen Mahaffey

Signature:

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013

## **EXAMINATION**

This doctorate will be examined on                      by

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Mahaffey, Helen (2013) *Systemic openings: exploring systemic positioning in everyday conversations in communities: an embodied reflexive inquiry*

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **OVERVIEW OF THE INQUIRY**

### **Locating This Inquiry: A Systemic Practice Doctorate**

This is a systemic practice doctorate undertaken by ‘people in practice’ in the formulation of ‘innovative, novel, maybe daring practice(s)’ (PDSP Handbook, 2006). Within wider research communities it can be seen through a social and relational constructionist (McNamee and Hosking, 2012) lens, under the broader umbrella of systemic qualitative research practice. As a systemic practitioner who practises in a number of different settings, including child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS), schools, communities, youth offending and fostering services, I was drawn to a doctoral programme with a strong practice emphasis for those involved in practice and with an ethos of innovation and life-enhancing explorations of practice. This inquiry stems from my practice as a systemic practitioner in multiple contexts in communities working alongside a range of people, professionals and non-professionals, in everyday conversations. My systemic orientation within each of the practices I am involved in calls for my ongoing attention to the relationship between self and other and an ongoing exploration of engaging ways of ‘going on’ together (Wittgenstein, 1953). I consider each encounter in therapeutic and non-therapeutic settings and community contexts, and every conversational encounter across these contexts, as unique and having potential for many different ways of ‘going on’. Each conversation we are in has the potential for therapeutic effect.

This inquiry is different from that of traditional research, and I mark this difference by using the term inquiry as opposed to research within a more traditional research genre. I discuss further some of these differences throughout this thesis. One important distinction to spotlight at this stage in the inquiry, however, is that it is

conducted by those who are *insiders* to, or *participants* in, the practice ... and requires ... a new idea about the nature of inquiry ... conducted as a collaborative effort *with* people rather than an investigation *of* them. Thus here research is conducted from *within* the midst of change (Professional Doctorate Handbook, 2006-2007).

The language, concepts and methods of research, amongst other features, are seen through a constructionist, post-positivist research lens. Inquiry from inside the experience is inclusive and participative; ‘we are all engaged in a form of inquiry’ (McNamee and Hosking, 2012). This ontology is about relational embodied practices and what it means to be a person in the world, experiential, personal, involved, and alongside others. There is a fit with how I practise and how I account for that practice, and with how I see, sense and experience the world. This comes under a much broader umbrella of qualitative research discussed at length in Chapter 4, and more specifically a position or philosophical stance that has helped being in both practice and inquiry the aim of contributing to a process of revision and enrichment of understanding (Elliott 1991).

### **Inquiry Stemming from Everyday Conversations: Keeping a Focus on Practice**

‘Getting out there’ (Lang, 2010)

My drive to embark upon this doctoral journey, and my inquiry that comes from attention to the everyday conversations I am invited to join, have been greatly inspired by Peter Lang, who was director of Kensington Consultation College (KCC) where I trained and became a tutor. KCC developed as a respected training centre from the 1980s; it was instrumental in the wave that gradually led to social constructionist ideas being taken seriously. Peter’s humour, passion and commitment to systemic ideas and practices were embodied in his very encouraging words about ‘Getting out there’ and sharing systemic ideas in our everyday personal and professional relationships. These words and how Peter spoke them have stayed with me and inspired me in this inquiry within everyday encounters. It is for this reason that I have not chosen one of the public sector positions I occupy as a systemic therapist and practitioner. I have learned from and been inspired by each individual who has allowed me to share these conversations. I hope that inquiry, in addition to enhancing professional reflexive practices, will offer a way to reach out to people and become more accessible to families and communities. Much of my work with families, schools and professional systems takes an appreciative approach (Cooperrider and

Whitney, 1999) in order to develop what is working well and to build on the strengths, abilities and relationships around children and young people to enhance potential.

Keeping the focus firmly on practice has helped keep me orientated and inspired within a community of socially and relationally minded thinkers and practitioners (Anderson, 1986; Burnham, 1992; Cecchin, Lane and Ray, 1992; Shotter, 1993; Pearce, 1994; Lang and McAdam, 1997; Cooperrider and Whitney, 1991; Hoffman, 2002, to name a few).

## **Everyday Conversations**

The use of the term ‘everyday conversations’ draws specific attention to the language used by persons to describe or explain their world. Semin and Gergen (1990) proposed that everyday understandings exist in the language of the culture and without presumptions being made concerning the cognitions, meanings and intentions of the language user. This is something that usually occurs within Western language systems and professional contexts such as CAMHS, social care and education; language that I have become familiar with as a systemic therapist based part-time in a CAMHS clinic and as an independent community-based systemic practitioner. My intention in using the term ‘everyday conversations’ therefore, is to create a distinction and a movement away from hierarchical structures, language, processes and preferred notions of knowledge. This is a movement away from what Bakhtin (1986) described as *canonised authoritative voices* at the expense of local and less authoritative voices, towards placing those voices that are alive in everyday life at centre stage. These voices are seldom invited into spaces of theoretical significance such as; doctoral dissertations, large scale conferences or philosophical publications. This inquiry aims to place emphasis on features of spontaneity, power-sharing, relationality, polyvocality and multiple ways of being in dialogue. Everyday going on is about trying to make sense, about knowing from within conversations and within ongoing relationships.

All conversations in this inquiry take place within the context of my independent professional practice as a systemic practitioner involved in diverse projects with family, schools, communities and inter-agency professionals. Semin (1987) used the term ‘ordinary’ or ‘natural’ language to describe this as being central to meaningful social behaviour, and whilst each such conversation has a unique context, it is less likely to conform to the conventional structures and rule games of the large organisations involved in, say, health, social care, youth justice, and education. In this way the processes, languages and structures of everyday conversation do not involve the intentional dominance of power of one person, most frequently

the professional. Although professional and relational responsibilities are present they do not take a dominant role, and there is a flattened hierarchy in practice and inquiry offering more available space and permission to talk from multiple positions as a mother, daughter, aunt and so on. This also has the potential to create opportunities in conversations, for others to lead in their lived-in knowledge and local expertise. Everyday conversations are also less pre-planned and less predictable, and there is a need for more relational improvisation by all involved. Within the practice inquiry of everyday conversations I intend to give myself permission to be curious and sensitive to relational movements, to let go of predictable methods and techniques, to allow happenings and to go with in-the-moment responses and resolutions that are mutually led.

### **Marking out a Different Route: I Am my own Case Study**

The rationale of being a case study within this inquiry comes from an orientation that sees inquiry as part of our everyday systemic practice activities in a way that is open to the senses, along with a curiosity about what might be (McNamee and Hosking, 2012). Writing in the first person marks a clear distinction from a post-positivist scientific approach to research in which the researcher is positioned outside the practice, controlled and producing relatively objective knowledge and academic results. Within this inquiry I aim to capture something of the unique, embodied dynamic, the unfolding, unfinished and novel features of being in a dialogue that I am fully part of and engaged in with others.

I use the metaphor of rock climbing as one way of enhancing an understanding of systemic positioning within this dynamic process, and this has prompted me to take a significantly different route to that of other more familiar research genres. It may challenge ideas about more familiar ways of doing research, and it may also be different to the reader's ideas and concepts. This thesis is a personal account that also incorporates collective and multiple voices of others co-crafted within the text as part of a collective journey. I am one of many participants, therefore, 'changing and being changed by the conversation, as part of the process of enquiry' (Chen and Pearce, 1995, p.78). I am the sole author, and the writing has a personal style and is from an auto-ethnographic genre that I elaborate in Chapter 4. The words, actions and influences of others are part of this whole, and the multiple voices act as a kind of 'super-addressee' in my writing.

The rights, duties, privileges and obligations of the different 'persons' in everyday social life are such as to give rise to two different kinds of accounting: ... that from within the

flow of action, when one clarifies one's actions as a first-person to a second-person in some way by further action ... (Shotter, 1984, p.15).

There are inherent challenges, however, in capturing the unfinished nature of talk and a sense of the dynamic living sense of the embodied relational experience in its complexity, diversity and uncertainty. I attempt to do something quite different, therefore, in introducing a climbing metaphor that is connected to my interest in embodied reflexive sensitivities within the conversational dynamic. I explore an embodied reflexive orientation to inquiry, focusing on systemic positioning within interactions in everyday conversations. I am interested in how openings for relational connections with others are co-created and how attention is given to reflexive processes. I am interested in the openings for therapeutic effect that may be facilitated in everyday conversations through an embodied reflexive orientation.

## **Challenges and Invitations to the Reader**

Many of the ideas, concepts and philosophies may be familiar to a systemic reader, especially around the core features such as self- and relational reflexivity (Burnham, 1992), in helping us enter this complexity. However, the introduction of the personal metaphor of rock climbing is an attempt to draw embodiment and embodied reflexivity centre stage. This is a very different concept in inquiry, and may present significant challenges to the reader. This inquiry however is intended to challenge ideas about practice and inquiry that are taken for granted, and to question ideas and language inscribed through traditions of well-trodden research paths. I attempt to create a different route not as an alternative but as a complement to others, and I invite the reader to stay alongside me with an open mind for the whole journey, with our differences in ideas and perspectives. Through this writing I have become more reflexive about the embodied responses generated in me as I read different texts, and I invite readers of this thesis to do so too, and to consider what may be informing these responses.

My interest in embodied sensitivities within this space has evolved and unfolds through the course of this thesis. I am interested how embodied reflexive attention can open new possibilities and learning for all involved within these conversations. I am interested in the openings for therapeutic effect that may be facilitated in everyday conversations through an embodied reflexive orientation.

In taking this different path of inquiry I am inspired and informed by a whole range of 'others', including those within the systemic community including colleagues and other writers. These are referenced

throughout. Many others remain as inspiring influences and are not connected to the systemic community; professionals who are committed to and passionate about working with children, young people and their families in multiple contexts, parents who are committed to doing the best for their children, and young people who are ever-resilient, resourceful and creative.

## **Inquiry Criteria**

This is not a conventional thesis and therefore I draw upon a combination of sources in setting out the criteria for this inquiry. These are mapped against criteria drawn mainly from the Professional Doctorate Systemic Programme (PDSP Doctoral Handbook 2015) and the field of qualitative research. There is still much discussion within the field, as to how quality can be evaluated in qualitative research. I am inspired by the call for resistance to ‘gold standards’ research (Lather, 2004), which is marketed through positivism (Tobin, 2012). The range of contributors from the qualitative research field who have shaped the criteria set out in this inquiry include: Denzin (2008), Ellis (2007), Guba and Lincoln (2005), Lather (1993), Richardson (2000), Tracy (2010) and others who have contributed to a set of criteria to assess validity and quality in post-positivist qualitative research. This is an important distinction from the criteria familiar within a positivist research paradigm characterised by a distinctly different language of generalisability, objectivity and reliability. Systemic practice inquiry fits more with a post-positivist research genre that generates important questions about what constitutes ‘valid’ research and offers a different research orientation.

A qualitative research approach emphasises words over numbers and, appropriately, presents layered descriptions of relationships between people, space and objects (Geertz, 1973a). From this complexity emerge ‘intelligible formulations’ (Shotter, 1993) and ‘rich rigour’, which Tracy (2010) suggests is a rich complexity of abundance that should be given precedence in qualitative research over the precision that is characteristic of quantitative research.

## **The Criteria for Evaluating my Research**

The criteria are set out in this way simply to provide a guide. A short commentary is provided under each criterion in this chapter and a detailed commentary in chapter 10 will document how each has played out in the thesis and will address how each criterion has been met.

**a) The inquiry is a worthy topic**

The inquiry will illustrate that it is a worthy topic addressing local concerns that are significant for people in the systems, communities and relationships in which they live. This thesis aims to demonstrate how the inquiry improves the lives of others through appreciative conversations that value multiple knowledges and opens generative ways of going on for families. It will show that attention to responsiveness and reflexivity enhances professional practice within communities.

**b) The inquiry is original or novel**

Original and novel features will be featured in this inquiry through its emphasis on body and metaphor. The metaphor of rock climbing in particular is introduced as a new feature, an embodied activity that can be used within a systemic practice and training context to examine and enhance an understanding of coordination with others. The concepts of embodiment and metaphor will be critically situated in the comparative literature and associated fields of practice and research.

**c) The inquiry is innovative and bold**

The inquiry will show examples of innovative elaborations of theory for systemic practice, including dialogical embodied reflexive features within systemic practice inquiry. The introduction and application of the rock climbing metaphor to conceptualise my positioning and the detailed examination it offers, is evaluated in terms of its innovation and boldness. This will include an assessment of its innovative use to enhance an understanding of embodied reflexive features of conversations and aspects of systemic practice that may have remained hidden.

**d) The inquiry makes a substantive contribution to the field of systemic practice and systemic inquiry, to members of the public, other professionals, communities or organisations**

The inquiry will show how contributions are made conceptually, theoretically and methodologically. Its practical contribution to children and families will be illustrated for example, by showing how local expertise and qualities are amplified through dialogue. I will consider how



a reflexive process of scrutiny of my own practice as a practitioner and inquirer may be significant for systemic and other professionals. The inquiry will specifically show the contributions it offers to the field of systemic practice, inquiry, training and leadership contexts in enriching an understanding of positioning and coordination with others in dialogue and with those involved in inquiry activities and processes.

**e) The inquiry is ethical**

The inquiry will consider the practice and inquiry activities and processes in a way that acknowledges the dynamic evolving, relational and ethical particulars of each case that is lived in, moment by moment. It will show that procedural and relational ethics are attended to with care, respect and concern in the treatment of people, characters, communities and that voices are illuminated and respected. The inquiry will aim to show the situational, relational and culturally specific ethics as they arise in the practice, and the other ethical choices that arise for me as an inquirer and practitioner.

**f) The inquiry demonstrates rigour**

Rigorous processes of gathering, observation and deconstruction of material will be demonstrated in this inquiry. Complex, multiple, and abundant descriptions and portrayals are generated, using social construction and relational construction as a meta-theoretical inquiry base. The inquiry will demonstrate how systemic ideas are applied, drawing specifically on dialogue, embodied literature and metaphor, in a systematic and thorough manner. Contextual tensions within the inquiry process will be shown including my attempts to work through some of these tensions via an evocative style of writing and use of the metaphor.

**g) The inquiry shows reflexivity**

The research will present examples of self- and relational reflexivity, including a critical and reflexive appraisal of the advantages and disadvantages of being a practitioner/researcher; It is further intended that reflexivity is generated for the reader by including a significant level of reflection and reflexivity on my part, acknowledging and considering specifically the inquirer's ongoing biases, decisions and dilemmas. I will evaluate whether the innovative application of the

use the metaphor of rock climbing as a reflexive tool within this inquiry, has the potential to enhance reflexivity within my own systemic practice and systemic practice inquiry.

**h) As an inquirer I talk from lived experience and practice relationships rather than ‘about’ others.**

The inquiry will demonstrate the living presence of me as the inquirer, including inner and outer dialogue, thoughts in progress, moments of noticing and the sensate details of the experience of conversations. The inquiry will try to coordinate with the interests of others by inviting the reader into this detail; to create movements in my writing from within practice that have engaged me and involve those with whom I have collaborated. Through this approach to the writing I hope to extend invitations to the reader to connect and be moved and generate their reflections connected to their direct experience.

**i) The inquiry shows a thoughtful consideration of power relations**

The inquiry will include an awareness and sensitivity to issues of social difference and diversity and differences in lived experience, belonging and identity. How these matters play out in both the area of professional practice inquiry and research relationships will be demonstrated in the inquiry. It will show how local knowledge and lived experience is privileged over authoritative dominant ideas of knowledge in practice and how I challenge some taken for granted assumptions within dominant discourses with their associated authority and conventions.

**j) The inquiry shows transformation in the inquirer’s thinking and practice**

The inquiry will demonstrate the process of change and shifts in the practice inquirer’s thinking and practice through the process of this inquiry. It will show the learning that became apparent through the process of inquiry including the use of rock climbing metaphor as an inquiry tool and the process of writing. This learning will be reflected on and made explicit to the reader.

**k) The presentation of the inquiry has aesthetic merit**

The inquiry will show aesthetic qualities through the writing that creates a resonance for the reader. It will privilege narrative and storytelling that brings people to life in the stories told. It

will offer a full-bodied and metaphoric experience that is intended to shift the reader and position the inquirer, into a reflexive aesthetic exploratory space. The inquiry will provide detailed pictures illustrating the movement of each episode and hopes to demonstrate artistic merit through a portrayal of life on the rock face and the full-bodied nature of practice in these rich gripping and compelling relational encounters.

## **Focus of Inquiry**

The inquiry focus fits with the aims, in my everyday practice, of looking for opportunities that arise as part of our everyday conversations to illuminate potential for creating openings for new understandings and connections between people. One particular practice focus is to extend understanding and build relationships around children and young people.

I am interested in the recursive processes as embodied beings and the openings that are created from within dialogue. This brings into view embodied relational features of the conversation space in and between people (Shotter, 1993a; Shotter, 1993b; Andersen, 1996; Shotter, 2010). This inquiry focuses on embodied reflexive processes that stem from being engaged with others in conversations in everyday community settings. These include schools (meetings with parents, staff and young people), multi-agency neighbourhood meetings with a range of professionals, and meetings in local community tenant halls with local residents. The conversations are about issues that matter to different individuals and groups.

Given the personal nature of the inquiry I pay attention to the multiple personal and professional contexts informing me within the reflections around the dialogical texts in my inner dialogue and outer conversations, questions, and moves (responses). The holding of both practice and inquiry positions is considered within a philosophical orientation and a relational constructionist perspective (McNamee and Hosking, 2012) that sees practice and inquiry together. The ongoing relational activity of living and creating understanding together is an ontological position (Shotter, 1993a; Shotter, 1993b; Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 2010) that constantly requires me to ask questions about the shared activities of 'I' alongside others within activities of both practice and inquiry. Self- and other reflexivity (Burnham, 1992; Hedges, 2005) in the context of these encounters become central.

## **Inquiry Activities**

Inquiry activities attend to being in the conversations with others. I hope to portray in the writing a sense of the ‘plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices’ (Bakhtin, 1984, pp.61-62).

- The way I present and represent these conversations through the written form becomes part of the inquiry activities and has ethical responsibilities. Dialogical excerpts unpack multifaceted features of the conversational dynamic action. Reflections on what is happening both in retrospect ‘on action’ and as the practice unfolds ‘in action’ (Schon, 1983) become an integral aspect of dialogue. Attention is paid to ‘*kairos* moments’ (Stern, 2004), that is, moments that are propitious for new understanding, and new actions from within conversations are explored through excerpts of dialogue and reflections around these excerpts showing my internal dialogue and external moves. Each conversation is set in its unique context, with a focus on the encounters that have struck me and others in different ways as I work towards creating openings, building relationships and exploring with others engaging ‘ways of going on’ together (Wittgenstein, 1953).
- Those who joined in these conversations, meetings, and gatherings were invited to explore the experience of the conversational sensate relational space and the potential that comes from this exploration. This is a joint inquiry into the experience of the dialogical space, exploring how that moved us on.
- Notes of direct utterances have been transparent within conversations as we have talked, and the different notes taken during the dialogue have been shared with those involved in our conversations of reflection afterwards. Invitations for some others to join these activities have not been taken up.
- Reflecting conversations offered a space to reflect on the experience of our talk together, both within conversation and in the subsequent reflecting conversations. Orientating questions throughout all the conversations are about our ways of ‘going on’ together (Wittgenstein, 1953) and create reflections about us, including the sensate experience, in the process of our interactions.

- I have shared my ideas about the climb, and the different connections I make with it, where appropriate, but my emphasis within these conversations has been on joining with others in the connections being made in the moment by a felt sense and a picture or an image offered in response.
- Discussions about preferred presentation of the words and dialogue and the way it would appear on the page were held with everyone who took part in the conversations. Different views were expressed and more clarity was achieved about what people did not want: ‘I do not want my words to be categorised or boxed in’ was one view, while another position was ‘This is how we speak so I would like you to put our words down in an open way around the stories we tell.’ Others suggested presenting the text as it would read and appear in a regular book format.
- The use of the metaphor of climbing and the conceptual grounding for this is elaborated more fully in Chapter 6. Rock climbing in particular has a personal meaning for me and embodies a moving, dynamic process. It also has inquiry applications and fits with my aim of capturing an embodied, live, moving sense experienced in practice. There is a fit within a philosophical orientation to inquiry, and the focus on the dynamic interactions in dialogue, the dynamic ebbs, flows, twists and turns. The attention this metaphor offers to the embodied detail, including the movements, still points (pauses), internal and outward activities, is something that appears to be gravely lacking in other research methodologies. Metaphor within an embodied reflexive lens to inquiry is explored as a reflexive tool, locating ‘I’ as an embodied being with other embodied beings in conversation.
- I develop an account of an embodied reflexive approach to inquiry, exploring the dynamic process of being in conversation with others, my systemic positioning within this process, and the embodied reflexive features of these interactions in the context of these conversational encounters that are constantly unfolding.

## **The Participants**

I use the word *participant* differently to the way one would usually associate with more traditional research and its suggestion of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ positions. ‘Participants’ in this inquiry refer to the

‘we’ who took part in conversations, and I include myself in that description. My participation is covered more thoroughly in Chapter 3. The parents, young people and professionals who participated in this inquiry were part of a larger practice and systemic inquiry project that I facilitated. This involved building relationships and communication within schools and communities. There were no referral processes as such, and people became involved mostly through invitations to join. Some were invited by professionals and others by the young people and families themselves who asked other parents, carers and young people to be involved in the talking together and creative thinking and action that happened mainly in groups. Multiple materials were used, including film, paintings, detailed notes, poetry and graffiti, and part of the process included sharing and discussing the experience of talking and creating together, which then guided a collective way forward. Detailed notes of dialogue were shared and reflected on within that process as part of a reflexive process. From these group events I was sometimes also invited by individuals to join them in one-to-one dialogue.

None of the participants were identified in advance, and those involved in the thesis came from conversations to which I had responded professionally with specific requests for opening up conversations, joining and facilitating dialogue. Everyone gave permission to be part of this specific inquiry (Appendix 1b) after being given information about the inquiry and the process (Appendix 1a) and having had a full discussion about the inquiry focus. I ensured all participants were comfortable with the research and there was an ongoing process built in of; checking in, consultation and support with participants at various intervals. Participant selection, therefore, was by invitation and was collaborative. My interest in undertaking this inquiry was shared, and those who feature in the accounts and vignettes in this inquiry were all part of that process. The youngest participant, Mohamed, whose family came from the Sudan when he was a little boy, was aged 16. He is featured in Chapter 7. Mohamed was invited to talk with me by his school and he was invited to choose a supportive appropriate adult as part of the inquiry process. He chose his uncle to be part of the consent and inquiry process, including follow-up conversations.

The parents and carers who took part were culturally diverse. All were black women with ages ranging from 23, to a grandmother in her mid-fifties. Those involved in conversations in Chapter 2 included Fatimah, Dounia and Lorna, women who had come from Morocco twenty years ago or more and who were settled with family in London, Arij was born in London and her family were from Somalia, and Janice, a mother and grandmother, described herself as a ‘Jamaican Londoner’. In Chapter 3 the parents and carers included Paulette, Aby and Jasmine, whose heritage was also Caribbean. Joe, featured in Chapter 1, was white South African and he had a pastoral support role in his school, while the other

professionals who were part of the multi-agency team featured in Chapters 8 and 9 described themselves as white and of British heritage. They included Jan, Susan, Belinda, Harry, Len and Gary, who emphasised that his ‘Scottish roots’ were most important to him. I similarly stated openly with all participants, my connection to my Irish heritage.

This transparency about our own cultural heritages as participants together was intended to create and encourage; openness, curiosity, sharing and learning within our cultural resource pool. There were others who were invited to be part of this inquiry but they did not give consent and therefore do not feature. Therefore the journey of this thesis was shaped by those who chose to be included and those who did not.

Out of the many conversations I had with different individuals and groups, I chose to focus on the ones that I was most struck by; those that seemed the most challenging, unexpected and perhaps the richest, most complex and most powerfully moving. I also chose episodes that created some difficulties, some impasses, ‘stuck’ or pivotal moments.

### **Ethical Considerations for Inquiry within Practice**

Ethical considerations are not static but remain constantly a feature in this inquiry. All inquiry from within systemic practice is informed by ethical concerns. From an ethical perspective there are central preoccupations of feminism and how language constructs sexism with elaborated notions of power located within the everyday and the local. This is reflected upon in conversation in Chapter 6 with Lorna about her experience of her son being stopped on a regular basis by police and her sense of being judged and blamed as a mother. There is a need to attend to micro-issues of how I am being influenced in the moment, my stance to inquiry in this conversation, and the micro-socially constructed stories that create stories of blame and shame within systems. How do I elevate the voices of those who are not heard or become silenced by systems? Ethical positioning calls me moment by moment to attend to encouraging other voices within this stance. I am assuming a relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999) orientated towards practices that are shared and answerable. I draw on ethical positioning as a systemic practitioner where I am required to manage different positions and influences whilst being involved in the act of practice and being part of the system. This is set out more fully in Chapter 3, on systemic practice influences, and in Chapter 4, in terms of the specific philosophical orientation of the inquiry.

## Areas Arising from and through the Process of my Inquiry

I have introduced an embodied reflexive frame that is currently being used in different contexts as a way of entering into the micro-reflexive detail of being in conversation with others. Systemic colleagues and social work professionals from different training backgrounds, systemic trainees and doctoral students have fed back the use of an embodied reflexive lens on practice interactions of working through complex practice dilemmas and also on the enhancement of individual and collective resources, abilities and skills. It has been described as ‘enabling’ and ‘encouraging’, and a validation of the different and meaningful ways people find of going on with others in everyday encounters, and it is applicable in both practice and inquiry. The use of this particular metaphor continues to ignite curiosity towards the possibility of exploring other personal metaphors that have meaning for people, and it opens the potential to build on existing systemic practice skills through paying careful attention to embodiment and presence within interactions. Areas arising from this inquiry are discussed more fully in the final chapter and quite freely build on ideas of the body making meaning *just by being* (Gendlin, 1997; 2003) as opposed to talking ‘about’ the body. A different and unique lens is offered to both practice and inquiry through an embodied reflexive frame I introduce as a flexible frame that is applicable to a range of settings. This is discussed in Chapter 10.

I have written published and unpublished pieces, including a co-authored book, which reflects my involvement in a range of different practice communities. These are referenced and detailed in the final chapter. The different audiences and contexts mean the language and style may differ. Some, for example, may be more formal and prescribed while others are more specific to a systemic audience. They include:

- ‘Systemic practice: “Getting out there”’, (Mahaffey and Chidgey, 2010)
- ‘Finding a Voice’, (Robinson and Mahaffey, 2012), a co-authored paper describing the practice of reflecting teams in the community
- ‘Embodied reflexive inquiry’ (Mahaffey, 2013). Unpublished

I hope to offer more specific publications from this inquiry to make it more widely accessible within those practice communities.

I have some experimental embodied reflexive pieces of writing in the shape of reflections from my diaries and connections to and through movement, the arts, poetry and stories and conversations. These are



taking shape and are about the relationship between embodied being, writing, talking and action and they have evolved through this inquiry.

## **Inquiry Question**

How can the metaphor of rock climbing enhance an understanding of systemic positioning?

I explore an embodied reflexive orientation to inquiry focusing on what is happening in the conversational space. I am interested in how openings for relational connections with others are created, and the systemic positioning within this process.

Implicit in this inquiry is a core question:

How do I assure that I am personally answerable and relationally accountable?

## **Aims and Potential Audiences**

My hope is to invite wider academic institutions and organisations of practice, and to extend that invitation to others, to 'self-scrutinise'. The process of the writing, reflecting on and inquiring at close range into interactions, including embodied reflexive reflections, represents a rigorous form of self-reflexivity. This inquiry has far-reaching contributions to make to systemic audiences including practitioners, therapists, systemic therapists in training and systemic practice doctoral students. I hope this thesis is more widely applicable also across multiple contexts that offer embodied reflexive ways of inquiring into our daily practices with people. CAMHS, community services, education, social services and youth offending teams are all potential audiences. It has the potential to further contribute to different management and leadership groups within each of these organisational communities interested in enhancing reflective and reflexive practices.

## **Community Practices: How I am Using the Term**

Different schools of thought bring different biases and meanings to the term ‘community’, so some clarity in terms of how I am using the word would be helpful here. Whilst community derives from the Latin word ‘con’ meaning with or together and ‘mun-um/ere’ referring to shared responsibilities and duties, central to any understanding is the social dimension of community ‘as shaped by social relations’ (Amit, 2002). Community through this lens is seen as ‘essentially social’, expressed in ‘communicative contexts’ and as being ‘the basis of recognition of the other’ (Delanty, 2001). This fits a systemic approach and the stance of this inquiry, and it also connects to the various professional roles and positions I held in the fields of community and youth work, probation and youth justice work, and restorative practices in communities. Despite the very different contexts, attempts to empower individuals and communities have been a theme running through all of these community approaches.

## **Key Concepts in this Inquiry: Positioning, Reflexivity and Metaphor**

### ***Positioning and Reflexivity***

These are key concepts within this inquiry: writing in the first person comes from a particular social constructionist tradition of inquiry. I take a position which acknowledges my reflexive stance, and I also critique the idea of reflexivity (Burnham, 1992) as a process of ‘meeting myself coming back ... [and] arguing from a complimentary position’ (McCarthy and Byrne, 1990, in Burnham, 1992, p.25). I explore reflexivity from within the experience of being and doing, embodied and acting as an internal dialogue is going on; self- and relational responsibility, therefore, are interwoven into the ethical fabric of systemic day-to-day practices. Positioning, reflexivity and responsiveness are integral features of climbing, also, in terms of reciprocal informing movements and the positioning of each climber to the other(s). Climbers together have a sense of movement without knowing the exact move itself. The move is felt through the pull, slack and tension of the rope. I can relate to this experience in practice and the relationship going on between the inner dialogue, outer dialogue and movement and positioning. For that reason this metaphor seemed worth exploring as an embodied reflexive resource. I discuss metaphor in the next section, and develop the concept and ideas connected to inquiry and practice throughout the thesis, specifically in Chapter 6. The visual and conceptual picture of a process of a journey on a climb acts as an orientation through a small route of inquiry into practices as a way of getting up the ‘abstract mountain’ (Bruner, 1986, pp.155-159).

All is in a constant ebb and flow as we move and respond to other embodied beings. The concept of ‘positioning’ described by Davies and Harré (1990) refers to the process of negotiated account production whereby our self-narrative, the accounts we may offer ourselves and our actions are a joint production that emerges from social interaction via the socially and culturally available discourses. These include prevailing discourses of selfhood, sexuality, age, race and so on. The human subject is seen to be simultaneously produced by discourse and a manipulator of it.

### ***First-Person Position Across a Range of Contexts***

I am a white female of Irish heritage working as a systemic practitioner in different contextual settings. These settings bring me into different and varied domains, including systemic therapy with children and families, and consultations with social workers working with children who have been moved from birth families because of safeguarding concerns and placed with foster families. I also work in schools with staff, children and young people and their families. I sometimes run groups for pupils and parents, and I am asked on a regular basis to join and support conversations within the wider community with professionals and families to facilitate conversations around issues that arise. I elaborate on specific contexts in Chapter 3. While this thesis does not have the scope to detail each of those different contexts it does, however, highlight the idea of positions as being multiple.

The many positions we may occupy, and the positions available within discourses, are seen as providing us with the content of our subjectivity and bring with them what Davies and Harré (1990) refer to as a ‘structure of rights’. These subject positions provide the possibilities for and the limitations on what we may or may not do. The ‘I’, therefore, has multiple dimensions. This becomes apparent when I talk about the different sources from which my inquiry springs in Chapter 3, including both the professional and the personal as valid and informing factors within each episode or encounter. Episodes of inquiry are co-created as we are all participants. Placing my being ‘within’ inquiry and practice opens me up to some ‘healthy self-scrutiny’ (Holzman, 2009, p.107) and places a spotlight on ethics, and self- and relational reflexivity. It turns attention to informing personal and professional contexts as they come to light in unexpected ways, allowing me to reflect on details of the dialogue within these moments of conversation.

Personal pronouns are used in a way that is transparent about my position and creates a richer sense of the text. I am interested how the movement between ‘I’ and ‘We’ is constructed, and my focus is on what this

means in an embodied way. In the reflections, how I am attending to the different rights and responsibilities and duties that are created throughout the use of particular personal pronouns will be transparent.

In different moments of the conversations there are different personal and professional influencing contexts, and a self-examination and reflection on my own cultural influences and biases is required. To include these openly within the account also reflects the risk I am taking in the practice of this inquiry. The concept of ‘safe uncertainty’ (Mason, 1993) helps me navigate a way through. Mason describes safety and risk as always being in a state of flow, and this seems a useful notion that is consistent with the evolving process of this inquiry and the different subject positions that come into being and are drawn into play from moment to moment. A stance taken in this inquiry is that we are all participants, all subjects, and there are many different positions that may be offered, accepted, claimed or resisted by the participants (Davies and Harré, 1990) in the process.

### **Metaphor: Use of the Particular Embodied Metaphor of Rock Climbing**

‘Metaphor it is argued is a fundamental mechanism that allows us to use what we know about our physical and social experience to provide understanding in a wide range of other areas’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

My rationale for using the particular metaphor of rock climbing is that it offers a way to explore the ‘I’ as a sentient being in practice. There are different ways in which I am making use of this metaphor. One is connected to my writing position as one of involvement and enmeshment in the process; it helps to provide a frame for thinking about embodied features of interaction. As a climber I cannot but be engaged and involved. Mountain climbing has been a personal passion of mine for many years. It is an embodied activity that requires an openness in the process of feeling a way through the journey, with the rock face, fellow climbers, external conditions all being part of the complex mix as I climb with other climbers. This connects for me also to a sense in this writing process that all meaning is in the process of becoming. Mastery, as a climber, is about responsiveness to the experience, about bringing a set of skills and being able to adapt, modify, or put aside tools at times to respond to the conditions, surroundings and fellow climbers. Like systemic practice it is about being fully engaged, present and involved. There is always an acknowledgement of and attention to the potential risk and unpredictable challenges that is as much part of the systemic practitioner’s encounters as it is of the climber’s on a rock face. There is a responsibility

to self and others on a climb, and as a writer, practitioner and inquirer I too have a 'relational responsibility' (McNamee and Gergen, 1999).

Acquiring an orientation that is responsive and relational in the process of finding a way of moving on together on a rock face connects to my constant vigilance as a systemic practitioner to those around and alongside me within a complex ecology of communities.

Connections are made in this metaphor throughout to brief features of the parts of a climb that connect to the area explored; these are set out at the beginning of Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7. In Chapters 8 and 9 the dialogical texts are explored through an embodied reflexive frame using sequences of climbing processes to explore different phases and features of inner dialogue and outer moves around the text. This is an attempt to capture and explore further some of the lived experience of our interactions. The dynamic experience of being in conversation and the sense of emergent and interconnected movements both come into view. New metaphors are offered and explored, igniting my interest in how metaphor itself is used as way of keeping alive 'feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story' (Bruner, 1986, p.143). There is insufficient scope here to explore this in depth but it is an interesting area that opens up possibilities.

There is a fit within this genre of inquiry to explore new ground, and the alternative route I am taking permits me to take a risk in exploring the use of this metaphor as a potential inquiry resource. Most of all it resonates for me with a sense of mystery, novelty and unknowing and therefore there is an unsettling aspect to it; this also is an attempt to elevate imagination and imagery into the realms of inquiry.

Reason in the West has long been assumed disembodied and abstract – distinct on the one hand from perception and the body and culture, and on the other hand from the mechanisms of imagination, for example metaphor and mental imagery (Lakoff, 1987, p.7).

Bakhtin (1981) described all meaning as processes of becoming, temporarily settled on the threshold between voices in action. This offers a new and novel way possibly in inquiry, to enter the complexity taking shape in the relational action of the dialogue (detailed in the dialogical excerpts). It connects to the anticipation, balance and poise of a climber at times, of being in a pause between the talk, and it has extended my understanding of what is happening in that space.

Some of the tension points unravel as I have grappled with the process of practice and also with attempts to describe, explore and portray in words the lived experience. Plain words sometimes are not enough, and linking them by chains of metaphor to human action, movement, life and emotion seems to provide a greater quality and more of a feel of what it is like in the action of practice. Metaphor particularly offers a way of entering into the complexity of processes of becoming. The metaphor of rock climbing is explored in more detail in Chapter 6, and its close use is illustrated thereafter with connections to the unfolding dialogue throughout the conversations with Lorna (a parent) there, Mohamed (a young person) in Chapter 7, and within a professional network meeting in Chapters 8 and 9. The conversation with Lorna in Chapter 6, for example, is unpacked using the metaphor as I enter into her image of ‘bracing myself’ as a parent in order to enhance her listening with her son. As a climber with other climbers there are points when I am teetering on a ledge when a marginal stretch or move can be ‘the difference that makes a difference’ (Bateson, 1972) and can open the potential for different types of actions as we negotiate together.

### **Contexts of the Conversations: Issues of Significance for Communities**

All conversations relate to issues of significance for communities and take place in different community sites that have specific relevance to those involved; neighbourhood halls and schools, for example, make up the location of the dialogue taking place. There are both immediate contexts to the conversations (community issues arising from episodes of concern) from which these dialogical texts have been taken in this inquiry and also a significant historical context to all of them.

#### ***Immediate Context***

The immediate context is one of concern, and in fact a number of different concerns were expressed by various adults from within a local neighbourhood in a multi-culturally and diverse inner city area. These were largely related to issues of ‘unrest’ in specific areas; feelings of being ‘unsettled’ were expressed by local residents groups, and multi-agency professionals described the level of ‘anti-social’ behaviour as very concerning. Under this term a range of behaviour was mapped out, covering episodes of verbal abuse, fighting, and the gathering of young people together in large groups in one particular housing estate as something that had become a more serious problem. This was something residents had said that they had ‘tried to do something about it’ but to no effect. Their concerns prompted a process of dialogue

between multi-agency professionals including police officers, housing workers, youth offending team social workers and social workers from a social care context as well as youth and community support workers. I was invited by this professional group after a number of meetings had taken place and things had not progressed. The context of my joining was to contribute towards thinking and reflection with the group about ways forward. This is explored in detail in Chapters 8 and 9 using the climbing metaphor to reflect on the multiple positions I shift into within the conversation and through a sequence of moves as I respond to the responses of others in dialogue.

I focus on this meeting because it was to be the springboard to different relational initiatives and ideas about collaboration with different community groups. It had the intention of creating a collective vision that involved community members in joining the thinking and action.

All conversations took place within a community context. Included are the conversations with parents in a neighbourhood group, like Fatimah, Dounia and others in Chapter 3, Lorna, a parent who asked to meet me on her own after attending a parent group, covered in Chapter 6, and Mohamed, a young person I met in a school setting, in Chapter 7. The episode detailed with the parents group in Chapter 2 which took place in a primary school is not directly connected but was one of the project strands of the work.

In each of these conversations attention is paid to embodied reflexive moments, my inner dialogue and outward moves in response to others, and our reciprocal responses. In each of these conversations my senses have been fully engaged and I consider how, in the act of talking together, embodied relational activities are being practised all the time. The metaphor of rock climbing is woven throughout the text and becomes more explicit in Chapters 8 and 9. It is presented as a potential frame for extending embodied reflexivity as a systemic practice and inquiry tool. This is elaborated upon in Chapter 10.

### ***The Historical Background Context to the Conversations in Community and Neighbourhood Work***

The historical context to the conversations is a hugely significant backdrop to the conversations. It relates to the devastating, tragic loss of life; a young person (a pupil at the local secondary school) had been the victim of a knife attack fourteen months earlier and subsequently died. This sent ripples of shock through the community, followed by concerns about the safety of other young people. The school most affected at that particular time sought support in dealing with the emotional and psychological effects and the consequences for pupils, especially, and their families, along with the wider school and community

including staff and other families. My systemic colleague and I, as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) systemic therapists, responded to the immediate request for support at that time because parents and school staff were concerned about their children and were feeling quite powerless about what to do. One of our responses was to offer a way of talking together based on the ‘reflecting conversations’ (Anderson, 2007) that have been used in different settings. This seemed to fit for young people, their families and those who were affected through their involvement in other ways, including concerned staff and professionals. I elaborate on this model later in this chapter.

The initial conversation, when I was approached a few months after the episode by Joe, a teacher in the school, remains a moving episode for me, and it was to be a defining, embodied, unique occurrence informing this inquiry. In this episode of conversation I noticed acutely an embodied engagement, and I became increasingly interested in how I was experiencing the talk and the sensate features of everyday conversations. This was when I began to use the language of embodiment that is developed further as a concept in the discussion in Chapter 5, especially. It is further developed with the use of metaphor, specifically the rock climbing metaphor, as a reflexive practice tool in Chapter 6 and I use it more extensively in Chapters 8 and 9 within and around the unfolding dialogue. The focus is on my engagement with my senses as I respond and position myself in relation to others, and on their responses relationally within the conversational space. Highlighted, for example, in the next vignette with Joe are the collective, embodied, relational activities happening in the space, the multiple perspectives and complexity, as different connections are brought forth and create opportunities for therapeutic effect. In many ways this dialogue, our reflective conversation afterwards, my noticing within the conversation and my ongoing reflections, were to shape this inquiry focus, as I illustrate in sharing the defining detail of this dialogue for me.

### **Case Vignette: Conversation with Joe**

Joe was a teacher with a pastoral role with whom I had worked running different groups for families and young people around themes such as transitions, and relationship building. He telephoned me on this one occasion and his voice had a different tone, pace and urgency about it. He had been approached at school and requested to do ‘something’ by various parents who were still in a state of shock and concern about the death of a boy aged 16 who had attended the school. Joe had experienced being in one of the relationship-building reflecting circles I had facilitated shortly after the tragic event, and wanted me to facilitate a similar type of talking space for those who knew this young person – his school friends, their



parents and the school staff who taught his year group. When we met face-to-face in the school Joe's urgency, worry, sadness, panic and mixed emotions were powerful and palpable. I was noticing his movements; all seemed quite rigid and jerky as he leant in and asked, 'Is there something you can do?' I was struck by sadness and remained silent, yet at the same time fully present to Joe in what seemed like a long pause. I then followed with 'I am here. Can we reflect together for a moment?' My choice of 'reflect' seemed better than 'think' together. It seemed to relax Joe, as I noticed his limbs begin to physically release of their tension and I noticed his shoulders relax. I picked up a non-verbal sign that there was a fit in this moment, and as I had picked up Joe's initial tension my intention was to try to relax him more in the talk. 'Is there anyone else who feels that there is something that should be done at this point, and how do you know what that something means?' As we were making eye contact there was a huge sadness in his eyes that his urgency had seemed to have concealed or held back. It came to the foreground again in this moment when Joe said 'I am supposed to know what to do when people come to me at times like this.'

I was wondering how Joe was carrying all these expectations: 'What are you noticing that different people need at this time? ... What do you need most right now and is that different to others?' Though only a few words, this utterance was packed full of engagement. A long pause followed, during which I noticed Joe's tension decreasing more; his breaths became deeper and fuller, and I was also breathing in more fully. As Joe spoke I felt the sadness and gravity and impact of the loss on different relationships. 'I feel devastated. What an awful loss of a young life.' 'Joe?' Another pause followed and it seemed more important to stay in the space as Joe started to talk, his voice shaking in this moment. I spontaneously leaned into the conversation bodily, we were engaged in eye contact together, almost in slow motion I could feel the moisture of a tear appearing in the corner of my eye and trickling over the contour of my cheek as I was moved by seeing tears running down Joe's face.

Words escaped me in that moment and I was feeling the loss in an embodied way. A strong moral order (Cronen, Johnson and Lannaman, 1982), or what Pearce (1996) termed a contextual force, was apparent in this embodied connection. It was telling me that it was more important to be there and stay in the space rather than fill the space with my words. This was a spontaneous responsive action, not what Bakhtin (1981; 1984; 1986) describes as a monologue; monologues are unambiguous voices, deaf to any response. We were in a verbally silent yet active non-verbal dialogue, a 'unique and once occurring' event (Bakhtin, 1993). While lost for words, in the moment, at the same time my body spontaneously knew with a compelling sense not to say too much or do something, but to be there.

Joe, in this space, began to talk about how personally difficult it had been for him with the loss, and of his experience of powerlessness, of 'not knowing what to do' or 'how to make things feel better'. I became aware of my noticing not just Joe's words but how they were uttered and how I was moved. As Joe uttered the word 'powerless' the word became part of his 'moving body' (Andersen, 1996). As he held his head in his hands I was following his movement intently.

My sense of being lost for words created a different kind of space perhaps. I became aware of the pace of my breath in relation to Joe, the deepness or shallowness of breathing, how the sighs and intakes of breaths of both Joe and me seemed magnified. In my gestures and eye movements I was engaged and compassionately curious.

Helen: 'How are you in this talk?'

Joe: 'It is very moving, I hadn't realised I was holding so much in.'

Helen: 'And is it ok to be moving? Would you like to continue talking with me in this way or is there another way to go on that would be more useful?'

This question inquired about the relational 'in-between' space (Shotter 1993a; 1993b; 2010). This seems to describe a space that Joe and I were in together, a space of talking and embodied happening between us. Joe explained that he had not talked in this way before about how personally difficult it had been for him in his struggle to be a professional for everyone around him who needed him. He then said, 'I have to be there for everyone else... [pause] ... And it's not enough.'

Joe uttered this as if he was pushing out the words, as if they were being forced on him, and I commented on this change in his voice and asked him for his thoughts.

Helen: 'Where do those voices come from? What other compassionate and supportive voices can you draw on? Whose voices give you different permissions at this difficult time?'

Joe: 'I don't think families really are placing pressure on me. I have a strong pressure I feel at times like this that I have to be there for everyone.'

I could have inquired into those stories that kept him needing to be there for everyone, but drawing on alternative compassionate others at this time I asked 'Whose voices can you draw on now that lift that pressure? How would they support you?' In response Joe said, 'They would allow me to express some of the hurt I am feeling right now.'

Joe: 'They would tell me just to be, to feel the loss and that with time the pain will heal.'

Helen: 'And how does this help you in relation to you here at school and ... you as a member of the school community going through this difficult experience and the range of diverse and multiple feelings that may be attached to that?'

Joe: 'It's ok for me just to be there.'

An opening for Joe to express and give voice to the struggles and hurt he was experiencing without feeling a pressure to do something seemed particularly important in this dialogue. Simultaneously I too felt a pressure lift from the need to act on something in response to Joe and a shift towards more of a position enabling me to 'be there' with Joe. I became aware of that sense of 'being there' and connected it to what was happening in between us:

Helen: 'How do you think others experience you being there Joe? What sense would they have of your being there?'

This question prompted a more appreciative stance of acknowledging different features of being there without doing. Alternatively I reflected that 'being there' was a form of doing and was an actively supportive position:

Joe: 'They would feel supported? A sense of comfort maybe you know ... to feel that the hurting is shared.'

Helen: 'What does a sense of others feeling comforted and supported by you being there mean now in relation to not knowing what to do?'

Joe: 'I guess it's ok to not know what to do, it's being there that counts and things will become clearer together maybe.'

Inviting an exploration about the experience of our talking with Joe provided an opportunity to reflect together on how we were co-creating and shaping the talk together. Joe spoke about feeling lifted through the talk from, in his words, 'stuff I was holding onto but didn't know how heavily it was bearing down on me'. I asked Joe what for him had made a difference and he said, 'Giving myself permission not to know what to do. How can anyone know exactly what to do? It is just an awful loss and being with people and sensitive is something that is more important.'

Joe went on, 'Together we will get through.'

I was deeply moved as he described feeling 'empowered and energised' in his 'commitment ... to be there for families' through this sad time. 'It hurts but being with others in the hurt is a comfort than being left alone with it.' I felt a huge compulsion to be there also through this relational embodied process: there was connection and a way that we found of going on. Joe offered his reflections after our conversation and shared that he 'felt lighter' and that 'a great weight had been lifted' from him. He described the experience of the talk as having 'a therapeutic effect'.

### **Responding to Communities: 'Finding a Voice' Events**

In this conversation with Joe, and with others in this thesis, I have been informed by a very rich background of systemic practices that is documented in the next section. Following this dialogue with Joe my systemic colleague and I were invited by parents and staff in the school to create a space to encourage a dialogue with those who had been most affected by this event at this very sensitive and difficult time. This opened an opportunity for establishing more collective support within the school community. It involved a multiple group of young people, their parents and carers, other family members and school staff, drawing on a systemic approach to respond to very sensitive and powerful issues that had been generated by the sad event. As systemic therapists in this context we were informed by Tom Andersen's reflecting teams (1995), detailed in the next section, as this was an intervention that gave expression to the young people and their families and staff, who felt more able to join with others in dialogue of this kind and to express the more personal effects of the episode on them. While this was not therapy as such, it was considered therapeutically effective in this context. It gave a voice to the needs and concerns of the young people and was a helpful way of clarifying and addressing how they might be supported in the school and wider community.

The poignancy of being part of this dialogue was striking, as young people expressed how 'it felt safe to talk about things that mattered but no one had risked talking about before'. I was completely moved as I instantly responded by expressing my awe at the courage and care they were showing to each other and how they were coming together to think of ways to support each other. One parent talked about her son 'Finding a voice that he had not had for a long, long time'. This group wanted to have further events of this kind, and on request we ran a series of events in other settings with others who had been affected. What came out of this was a song written and performed by the young people at the school. A reflective

space in a calm area of the school was set up for young people to share their thoughts, messages, memories and symbolic tokens in memory of their friend. Parents and other family members were invited into this space after school. Prompted by parents my colleague and I felt compelled to write something, although they declined our request that they write with us. While there was no direct input from those who participated, the writing was still undertaken in collaboration with everyone taking part as the process was shared, and verbal collaboration was central to this, involving those who had been part of these conversations. The group agreed to use 'Finding a Voice' (Robinson and Mahaffey, 2012) as the title.

### **Situating Community-Based Practices in the Systemic Field**

Systemic practice as distinct from 'systemic therapy' has multiple overlapping features, but 'practice' reflects the broader and multiple applications of a systemic approach (Burnham, 1992). Over 20 years ago (10 years before I was trained in Systemic Psychotherapy) debate abounded about whether to make family therapy a profession in the UK. Systemic practice grew as the Association of Family Therapy supported the application in other professions of family therapy's ideas and methods, and systemic practices have continued to develop and evolve, extending its contexts beyond therapy and working much more widely across different professional systems. Systemic practice was seen as being well placed to hold and manage the diverse multiversa of professional voices, and those of diverse and multi-membership family groups.

### **The Marlborough Model**

Systemic ways of working in communities and beyond the therapy clinic have been around for a number of years. The Marlborough model, as it has come to be known, is a systemic way of working that has been hugely influential in its attempt to widen the accessibility of systemic ideas and practices to a greater range and number of families, children and young people. In particular it appealed to those who found that clinic-based practices did not fit or that it was difficult to engage in therapy within a clinic setting for whatever reason. The Marlborough model has led a particular systemic route working with multiple family groups for over the last forty years, working creatively with socially disadvantaged families in Britain. It has been led by great practitioners in the field like Asen, Cooklin, Dawsen and McHugh who built on the early work of Minuchin (1974), and also Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffamn and Penn (1987).

This is also in a context of significant developments over the last 15 years in multi-agency working in schools in the United Kingdom. A key policy framework underpinning this has been Every Child Matters (2004). This offset the greater onus being placed on schools, for example, to put in place policies and procedures in order to be better equipped to respond to issues of risk and safeguarding. In terms of research there appears to be little on the effectiveness of multi-agency working and limited evidence of effective preventative collaboration between services around issues of the complex issues faced by families and communities. These include issues such as domestic violence and sudden and often traumatic separation from family and community or country of heritage.

### **Multi-Systemic Approaches**

Internationally, multi-systemic approaches are well evidenced as effective in working with young people with anti-social behaviour and their families (Henggeler et al., 1998). However these approaches are usually brief (5 months) and very intensive, working around the clock with parents and caregivers to facilitate change in the family and young person. The whole team works around the child and family within a structural and strategic framework (Henggeler et al., 2009). This approach has been piloted across Britain, and works with small numbers of families with a high level of professional input in an intensive way.

### **Direct Influences to Practices Portrayed in this Inquiry: Reflecting Conversations in Systemic Community Practices**

The response that my systemic colleague and I adopted followed directly from this conversation with Joe and was strongly influenced by Andersen's (1990; 1992) inspirational idea of the 'reflecting team'. This was first applied within the field of family therapy, whereby conversations became transparent instead of being behind a one-way family therapy screen. Families became witnesses and listeners as therapists respectfully discussed their ideas in the presence of families, placing everyone in different positions. Andersen was interested in the way words were uttered and communicated.

The listener (the therapist) who follows the talker (the client), not only hearing the words but seeing how the words are uttered, will notice how every word is part of the moving

body. Spoken words and bodily activity come together in a unity and cannot be separated ... The listener who sees as much as he hears, will notice that various spoken words 'touch' the speaker differently (Andersen, 1996, pp.120-1).

This method generates different conversations in the presence of all those involved, opening up a different type of space in which people can move on, and move on more respectfully together. It has been widely used, and more recently adapted to work in communities traumatised and disrupted by tragic or unsettling events. Garcia and Guevara (2007) adopted and modified these ideas in Argentina in response to the traumatic legacy of the country's military dictatorship (1976-1983) and the failure to address issues of social justice and human rights.

Reflecting conversations are an ethical and human response. Garcia and Guevara's work inspired me in the conversations with different groups and individuals in the community context and the way I am joining conversations with others. They acknowledged 'clinical practice as political practice' and this was inherent within their question 'How can we contribute to the generation of further acceptance of difference and inclusion?' (Garcia and Guevara, 2007, p.61). Clinical and political practice are seen in relation to the exercise of responsibility as participants of social acts, based on its consequences. Language is seen as meaning-making, and constituting our world views as generating our reality. Therefore 'conceiving our words as formative increases our responsibility as we use it' (Shotter, 2010). It also makes me attentive to the language I am using within a structured space in this writing as a possibility of reframing the social construction of the world. Building on the idea of the 'language–thought–world relationship ... as a dialectical one' (Freire, 1972, in Garcia and Guevara, 2007, p.61) I zone into the embodied aspects of language, including the silences, pauses, the non-verbal and other details of language as intrinsic to communication. These details within such events can be seen as a 'communication act' (Pearce, 1994).

## **Broader Systemic Practice Influences**

Many inspiring systemic practitioners are part of this exciting approach to practice, reflecting on practice and considering the positions and stances we take within it. This always involves a questioning of what has gone before and current practices. Burnham's (1992, p.17) Approach–Method–Technique focuses on reflexivity within the field of family therapy and is one of the most useful concepts in creating a framework for considering issues of social difference and diversity. Burnham (1992, p.24) introduces the

acronym GRRAACCES to cover issues of diversity around gender, race religion, differing abilities, age, culture, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, while Cooperrider (1990) acknowledges people's need for affirmation, developing affirmative and appreciative practices. I have also used De Shazer's (1988) future-focused therapies, Penn's (1985, p.301) attention to future-orientated questions that illuminate the present, and Andersen's reflecting teams and dialogue (1987; 1990; 1992), as detailed in the next section.

Pearce's (1989) close attention to language and the meaning of things that are spoken has a direct influence on community practices and the way I am positioning around terms such as 'community', 'professional' and 'young person'. 'The community' does not refer to one homogenous group but to rich and diverse cultural groups. One characteristic of the neighbourhood is its rich cultural diversity. The danger inherent in these generalising terms, however, is that they group people together, oversimplify or ignore differences and cultural diversity, and fail to see abilities, qualities and strengths within communities. A systemic perspective looks beyond labels of 'difficult', 'offender', 'anti-social', and 'troublesome', which may be attributed to young people and families, in order to think of processes that help 're-story' their lives by drawing on positive experiences and abilities and seeing having future possibilities (De Shazer, 1985; Epston and White, 1992; Checchin, Lane and Ray, 1994).

I elaborate on systemic practice influences in Chapter 3 and connect these to the personal professional influences that inform my biases towards some theories and concepts over others.

### **How this Backdrop Guides my Inquiry**

Systemic community and neighbourhood practices form a complex and compelling ecology; these are deeply human events that affect us in our relationships and in our embodied beings. The conversations portrayed within this inquiry reflect these complexities, and I hope to add to the understanding of what it is to be an embodied relational being in the world. The multiplicity, diversity and complexity and dissensus are all depicted as part of the relational mix and are reflected in the rich and multiple voices in this inquiry. Relationships within these conversations constantly evolve as I am, and we are, influenced by and influence others.

I want to honour the diversity, culture and narratives of everyday life; these are to be taken seriously and listened to as we in conversation explore how it is possible to say what is said. I want to study the meanings of language in use (Wittgenstein, 1975). I aim to create collaboration and collaborative



conversations. Going into the next chapter, which looks at the development of systemic ideas and the part language plays in the formation of human subjectivity, I focus through the lens of embodiment as this is an area that has been given patchy attention in systemic literature, in my view.

### **Embodied Relational Moments that Guide me on**

In the conversations with Joe and the parents in the gathering that followed I am embodied, I am being changed in the talk, and, by paying particular attention to embodied features of this conversation, hidden resources come to light in this process. The embodied significance of these interactions in conversations, the embodied senses and their physical manifestations are poignant, and yet they have been sidelined in systemic literature until very recently. These embodied sensations, tensions, moments of feeling very moved and the way they physically manifest in the moment, guide me to scrutinise and question moments within my own practice, which changes me in relation to my responses to the responses of others. I connect this to what Denzin and Lincoln describe as ‘a breach between what we practised previously and what we can no longer practise’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.116).

The next chapter tracks the theoretical and conceptual development of systemic practices with a view to identifying blind spots in terms of embodiment. Other disembodied metaphors have been used as conceptual tools to examine and reflect on practice. I explore this opening as a potential to privilege embodied features of practice, creating a space to consider a more embodied metaphor in this inquiry as one way among many to forward our understanding of embodied reflexive practices.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **A THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKDROP: A SYSTEMIC EVOLUTION**

My research follows a social constructionist route taken within a systemic community of practitioners, inquirers, trainers, supervisors, practice doctorate peers, and other writers. Although there is no one single and agreed definition of what constitutes a social constructionist approach, social constructionism has been a major influence in the field of systemic family therapy practice. In this chapter I liken my thinking about how I prepare, orientate and position myself in relation to research as a systemic practitioner within the practice to the preparatory aspects of a climb. I look to journeys and other paths opened up by challenges to practice and theoretical issues and questions raised from within a social constructionist orientation. These include questions about knowledge and language, and shed light on the significant influences over the years within the systemic community. They also provide some insight into my journey of inquiry and point to a question I have put to myself: Why this inquiry and why now?

I look to the macro-theoretical and conceptual influences informing the footholds and handholds I am choosing on this systemic practice and inquiry path. I track the path systemic practice has taken and how this is shaping my inquiry. Some of the influences of dualism of body and mind are considered towards the end of the chapter, as are openings to consider illuminating systemic embodied positioning and their significance for everyday practices, especially at a time when systemic practice is being more widely applied across multiple contexts. I examine what constitutes an embodied orientation with an illustration from a conversation with a group of parents towards the end of the chapter. My more specific preferences and biases for conceptual and practice tools are considered in the light of personal and professional informing contexts addressed in Chapter 3.

#### **The climb**

The preparation for setting out on a climb, especially on a route not taken before, can often be taken for granted. This can be fatal to a safe and positive process of the climb, and an acknowledgement of the risks along the way is key to any preparation. I liken the preparation I have made, as a climber, for challenging multi-pitch climbs, to the preparation for the approach I am taking to inquiry. As a climber, achieving a certain state of body and mind for my approach to a climb is similar to the approach I take as a systemic practitioner, supervisor and inquirer, especially as I am creating a different route for an ontological position that recognises knowledge as being a generative and ongoing process from within embodied experience. As I set out, and before I go further on the inquiry route I have chosen, the process of looking back at different routes carved out by others seems apt. This is part of the process of getting ready and being in readiness, highlighting unseen and unnoticed features and routes that have not been raised in relation to inquiry from within practice. Getting into readiness involves firstly looking at the panoramic background, a historical backdrop of great climbers, practitioners and thinkers from different fields, tracking the moves they have made and the different routes they opened up.

### **Getting into Position for a Greater View**

This part of the chapter represents the preparatory looking around at what has gone before as I consider how to proceed. Exploring how the systemic terrain has evolved over time, by perusing its contours and potential challenges, informs my going on in this inquiry. I look back at the historical backdrop to see its beginnings and earlier developments in the process of systemic evolution of concepts, ideas and theoretical considerations stemming from practice and ethical concerns. I became curious about certain blind spots that appear through an embodiment orientation. This consideration is introduced towards the second part of this chapter and plots how my inquiry question came to take shape.

This first part offers a vantage point from which to explore how others have journeyed through ethical and practice questions and challenged taken-for-granted notions and claims about language and knowledge. From this position I am mapping a way for the embodied reflexive inquiry landscape ahead that seems to fit for reflexive inquiry from within the relational space. It creates an argument for an ontology informing the inquiry route I am taking. I marvel with great appreciation and humility at the therapy landscape and the groundbreaking routes scaled. Given the interests of this inquiry, I want to illuminate the space that has also emerged within the literature and draw closer attention to embodied reflexive practice and inquiry in the more everyday voices that are alive in our everyday life. Creating a space for inviting alternative voices into conversation with the big theoretical grammars – a doctoral

dissertation is one such, along with large-scale conferences – means placing myself in a different position to the dominant notions of theory. The language of authoritative, valid, core, persuasive arguments and convincing correlations does not fit for an inquiry from within practice; the search for a way of capturing something of that experience of our proceedings in everyday interactions and making sense of this process calls for something different. Personal contexts that have drawn my interest in elevating the resourcefulness of the everyday are explored more fully in Chapter 3; these include personal and professional influences and the conceptual and practice tools I have drawn on, such as a self- and relational reflexivity that demands we move more into the relational space.

This chapter unveils some influences of the dualism of body and mind that is considered towards the end of the chapter. It opens different entry points (among many others) raising its significance at this present juncture and the need to explore varied and alternative ways of inquiring into our everyday encounters. The application of systemic practices is wide and varied, permeating many different and multiple settings that extend beyond the context of therapy.

### **A Historical Backdrop: Change as Part of Evolutionary Backdrop**

A historical review of some of the landmarks shows that practices, theories and concepts that have shaped the field of family therapy and systemic practices have evolved over time. They continue to form and inform current systemic practice, teaching and supervision contexts, and they locate me within a community of systemic practitioners and inquirers including systemic therapists, theorists, philosophers and social constructionist researchers. The practices and theories themselves have occurred within historical social, political and philosophical contexts. I cannot cover all of these aspects. However, by identifying key landmarks, I can locate useful building blocks, vantage points and spaces for ways of going on, invoking Isaac Newton's wise words, 'I have seen further by standing on the shoulders of giants'. I liken those who have shaped and informed systemic practice to pioneering climbers who led different paths and routes previously unclimbed. They were responding to what was happening at the time in practice and thinking, and in the challenging of some dominant 'grand narratives' (Kinchelco, 1997). This involved taking risks of a kind and extending the boundaries of accepted ways of doing and conceptualising things; knowledge and language, power relations and 'universal truths' were challenged through their different moves. This bird's-eye view allows the identification of some macro-shifts and what informed them, and the route tracked by systemic practitioners. Through the lens of relational embodiment this looking back brings to light certain features. Metaphorically I am inviting a position of

leaning back to see a bigger picture of this panoramic view. This background illuminates particular hidden routes, or those not taken in practice, that come to light as I take an embodied relational lens to the backdrop later in this chapter.

### **Key Landmarks of Change: Challenging ‘Grand Narratives’ and Taken-for-Granted Knowledge Claims**

One historical landmark, in my view, was the questioning of the Western world’s perception of knowledge within what came to be termed as ‘modernism’ with its dominant ‘grand narratives’ (Kinchelco, 1997). This has become too safe and established a ledge, in my view, created by presupposed assumptions (Burr, 2003), and in many ways its legacy continues to influence our everyday understanding of being, acting and interacting (relating) in life. This includes how we conceptualise things, use and find our way in language, what it is to be a person and how we enter into and do certain activities including ‘therapy’ and conversations within the field of systemic practice. Our existing systems of health, education, and other services in the larger society are ‘reflective of dominant ideologies and ways of seeing’ (Kinchelco, 1997) that favour certain types of knowledge over others. I am interested in how ideas changed and evolved within the world of practitioners, writers and philosophers over time also. Wittgenstein, for example, whose later work I cite, changed position after his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), where he supported the idea that language was built from atomic statements using logical connectives. He later abandoned this idea. To some extent this may highlight the strength of the pull that assumptions based on Cartesian notions of reason and logic continue to wield, with their implication that the nature of the world could be revealed by observation, that a definite social world is to be discovered, that human social life is predictable, and that explanations and theories can be extrapolated. This connects to fields such as psychology and diagnosis, and its associated language is rigid and non-negotiable and dominated by hierarchical knowledge assumptions.

This position on knowledge and language still has implications. This frame of posing questions about the world and gathering relevant data in a rigorous manner remains in evidence, carrying with it the assumption that it gives us a good knowledge of the social. The positions of knowledge that come from facts, and how these generally relate to facts and figures, continue however to disregard the knowledge that is created between people; these positions, therefore, are relationally absent or blind.

### **Challenging Notions of ‘Truth and Reality’: Towards Social Relationships**

One starting point is social psychology (Berger and Luckman, 1966), drawn on orientations emerging from postmodern philosophy. However a range of earlier writers across different fields challenged commonly held views. Merleau-Ponty (1964), for example, refused to see the world as a collection of static, self-contained ‘things’, or to acquiesce in the notion that our relation to the world is a contemplative and a purely cognitive affair. He talked about the ‘visible’ and the ‘invisible’ in the world, which is always in a state of huge flux; birth and death, transforming and becoming and always in an un-predetermined manner. From other domains the pioneering work of the structuralists built on the work of their predecessors, in seeking to decentre the Cartesian subject, and brought in its wake an increasing emphasis on self/other relations, especially mediated by language (Schweder and Miller, 1985).

### **Meaning-Making as Relational: ‘Language in Use’**

Wittgenstein’s later *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) focused on ordinary language in everyday use and conceived meaning in living language in terms of how the speaker in a specific context uses words within language to express intentions. This change in Wittgenstein’s philosophy opened a route that saw language as being an ongoing locally constructed language game of sense and meaning-making. Logic therefore was being negotiated as grammatical rules were being created and played out in a unique circumstance. Meaning-making in language was to understand more about grammar and ‘games people play’. Language was seen as an ongoing locally constructed game of sense-making. Shotter (2010) much later introduced the notion of a ‘third kind of knowing’ which I describe below.

### **Bateson’s Evolutionary Metaphors: Open and Closed Systems**

Bateson’s (1972) use of evolutionary metaphors has been influential. He stated that human systems and biological systems develop and evolve on a trial and error basis. Family systems continually adapt to their ecological contexts – extended family networks, local communities and cultures – which continuously influence and which themselves are evolving and changing. Distinctions were made between open systems, with more permeable boundaries, and closed systems, which are more rigid and less penetrable, and two types of feedback are generated from the systems. Both were considered as necessary for a relationship or social unit to function. In open systems feedback serves to produce escalation, while in closed systems feedback reinforces stability and the maintenance of existing patterns. Open systems can bring about change, are flexible, can adapt and make alterations inside or outside the system. We can

evaluate systems of organisations, such as those dealing with health, social care, education and youth offending, and which are steeped in particular protocols, procedures, grammars. These create specific ways of viewing the world (and people), and offer only certain kinds of spaces for people to act into. This led to questions about the extent to which these systems were too rigidly closed and therefore unable to adapt to new demands or changes in the environment, or whether they were open enough to the novel, to innovation and change.

### **The Milan School: Creating a Route through**

The original Milan school opened a new way forward and merged clinical innovation of the systemic cybernetic formulation of Bateson's research (Bateson, 1980) with the constructive perspective elaborated by Watzlawick (1984). They applied it to family systems, proposing that recurring interactional patterns between family members served to obscure or draw attention to latent or unacknowledged narratives or events in the family's history. Specifically within the systemic field, circular questioning came to be known within the Milan-type interview, marking a significant shift, with the reflexive loop between therapist activity and family narrative, which had remained unarticulated, moved firmly into view during the 'post-Milan' phase. 'Neutrality' as a therapeutic, non-partisan stance was part of that evolutionary phase and, not long afterwards, the blind spots within this phase were highlighted from within by those practising and thinking about the process. They acknowledged the impossible idea of neutrality. This was reviewed later by Cecchin et al. (1992).

Within this evolutionary phase came a critique of Milan applications (Goldner, 1985 a and b; Hare-Mustin, 1986; MacKinnon and Miller, 1987; Jones, 1991; Jones, 1993). A feminist lens in my view was a leverage point that opened up and guided a different way through thinking and practice (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988; Andersen, 1990; Salamon, Grevelius and Anderson, 1991; Salamon, Grevelius and Anderson, 1991b; Anderson and Goolishian, 1992; Cecchin et al., 1992; McNamee and Gergen, 1992; Burnham, 1993; McCarthy and Byrne, 1995) in what came to be known as the Post-Milan School.

Constructivist ideas in family therapy occupied the space significantly in the 1980s through the works of a family therapist (Watzlawick, 1984), a cognitive psychologist (Glaserfield, 1984), a cybernetician (von Foerster, 1981; 1984), and biologists (Maturana and Varela, 1980; 1988). Constructivism challenged the idea of 'a monopoly of truth' and claims of universal knowledge (Watzlawick, 1984) and highlighted a responsibility for putting 'objectivity in parenthesis' (Maturana, 1990). Postmodern philosophical

orientation therefore challenged certainty, clarity and ‘grand narratives’ (Kinchelco, 1997) like many of the post-Milan teams. This created an opening, in my view, that accepted others’ views of reality as being equally valid while reinforcing the notion of responsibility for one’s chosen or accepted version. Ideas around multi-versa have stayed with me and are evident in all my conversational encounters with individuals and groups. Both practice and theoretical notions and the focus on processes by which change occurred were challenged. Jones (1993, p.25) argued that this did not mean that therapists had to give up their ‘intentionality or activity in relation to clients; it merely meant that they had to accept that they could not fully predict or determine the clients’ responses.’

### **Challenging Constructivist Perspectives: An Impetus for Challenge and Forward Momentum Towards a Second-Order Position**

Acknowledging practice problems has led to significant moves and change. Systemic family therapy practitioners, for example, challenged cybernetic and constructivist perspectives for failing to appreciate the reality of difference or unequal access to participation (Kearney, 1987; Hoffman, 1991; Speed, 1991). Maturana’s (1988) claim that the advantages of constructivism lay in the move away from a world of universal truths towards a ‘multi-versa’ (a world of multiple realities) was a bold move away from what had become familiar and was now being questioned on an ethical basis. In practice, it could allow for an ‘amoral, anything goes’ kind of approach to therapy which denies the therapist’s responsibilities for her actions (Jones 1993: 25). I would call this an acknowledgment of a ‘no ledge’ moment at a time when the ground or ‘rock’ on which people stood was being questioned. There were distinct movements in the form of debate with momentum towards a theory of second order cybernetics and emerging constructivism. Very real and everyday concerns about practice created a context within which social constructionist ideas, that I detail later in this chapter and in the following one, began to flourish (Gergen, 1985; Fruggeri 1992; McNamee and Gergen, 1992; Shotter, 1993) alongside the feminist critique (Goldner, 1985; Hare-Mustin, 1986; Jones, 1988; Jones, 1991). This I consider was a pivotal move that positioned therapist and client within the observing/observed system and focused greater attention on wider social and political contexts in which family narratives were embedded within a second order cybernetics frame. It included the therapists’ own biases, theories and histories. In other areas Bakhtin (1986) suggested that authoritative voices were canonised at the expense of local and less authoritative voices, adding to the thinking about ethics, the imbalances in relationships and the implications for systemic practitioners of working with issues of social difference.



## **A Feminist Position: Illuminating Power Differentials**

Feminist practitioners and writers argued that the issue of power differentials in family, client and therapist relationships was a significant gender issue. MacKinnon and Miller (1987), writing in that tradition, asserted that ‘it may be those who lack an analysis of power relations who most easily, albeit unintentionally, engage in oppressive relationships’ (1987, p.145) and ‘those with less power are more likely to have their view of reality discredited’ (1987, p.152). The feminist critique of constructivism was firmly placed within the debate regarding power. Family therapy debated issues of power and its existence, especially through the Haley/Bateson debates in the 1980s (MacKinnon and Miller, 1987; Dell, 1989) and created offshoots within the field (Jones, 1993, p.141). Haley (1956) regarded power as a social reality, and the power base of the therapist as the strategic site for therapeutic intervention. The Milan school was aligned to Bateson’s systemic idea that unilateral power and control was a distorting premise that obscured recursion and circular causality (Bateson, 1980). It is of interest that the significant critiques and revisions of Milan applications arose from practitioners who had adopted the Milan approach (Goldner, 1985a; Anderson and Goolishian, 1988; Byrne and McCarthy, 1988; Jones, 1990; Andersen 1991; Jones, 1991; Anderson and Goolishian, 1992; Jones, 1993; McCarthy and Byrne, 1995). Debates and challenges of second order practice and thinking followed. I believe these debates are still relevant today within different settings and systems that are characterised by and operate in a first order way including health, education, youth justice, and social care.

## **Power as a Discursive Practice**

Foucault’s (1967; 1972; 1979; 1980) concept of dominant and subjugated discourse, Derrida’s (1967) examination of what lies behind that which is highlighted or privileged, and Lyotard’s (1988) rejection of the concept of the grand narrative provided a way through, or a handhold. As a ‘discursive practice’, power differentials as a feature of family systems and family/professional interfaces could be seen in a new light. Post-structuralists, Foucault in particular, offered the systemic family field an opening or different vantage point ‘on how ideas, practices and versions of history become dominant that meant that other voices and perceptions in relation to the same event become marginalised and silenced’ (Jones, 1993, p.139).

These openings positioned family therapy more widely within postmodern philosophy, offering ‘a formal theory to conceptualise the socially situated position of therapist. Sensitivity to language, gender and the socio-political domain (Murray, 1990, p.69) all become central. Common to all postmodernist therapists is a ‘pervasive abnegation of the role of the therapist as superior knower, standing above the client as an unattainable model of good life’. The therapist has instead ‘a strong commitment to viewing the therapeutic encounter as a milieu for the creative generation of meaning alone’ (Gergen and Kaye, 1992, p.194).

## **Social Constructionism**

Ideas permeated the systemic field through the theoretical work of Gergen (1985; 1992) and Shotter (1990; 1992) amongst others. One of the ideas within a social constructionists lens was that there is no such thing as ‘objective knowledge’; different constructivist thinking held that ‘the meanings and concepts that people live by exist in an inter-subjective medium’ (Hoffman, 1991, p.7).

According to Gergen, social constructionism is primarily concerned ‘with elaborating and explicating the processes by which people describe, explain or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live’ (1985, p.266). He states that it has been welcomed for its challenge to an individualism endemic in Western culture. Secure and trusted beliefs about persons, including ourselves, are placed in question. This was a significant move. To use the metaphor of the climb, this move was a step off from a secure ledge, where the process itself meant letting go of established beliefs about the individual and people and a movement away from a comfort zone or ground where all traditional constituents – the emotions, rational thought, motives, personality traits, intentions, memory – had been taken for granted as ways of understanding the world (Burr, 2003). McNamee and Gergen (1992, p.168) made reference to these features, “losing ground”, as social constructionism opened and created new ground taking reality as being inter-subjectively and trans-subjectively created. Language and communication are primarily constitutive of social reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Leppington, 1991; Gergen and Gergen, 2003). ‘Thus our mental life is never wholly our own. We live in a way which is both responsive, and in response to, what is both “within us” in some way, but which is also “other than” ourselves’ (Shotter, 1993, p.45). This view is different from constructivism in its emphasis on concepts and memories arising in social exchange and mediated through language. Language is a system by which reality is collectively

and actively constructed. Conversation becomes the fundamental human reality through and within which everyday life is constructed, maintained or transformed.

## **Implications of Social Constructionism for Practice**

Objective truth claims became a rock that had no foundation within social constructionism; it was not necessarily anti-realist, though it neither denied nor affirmed other models of knowledge formation. It was, rather, that it did not hold with notions of grand theories which denoted a singular universal reality. Theories of objective reality were numbered among many theories on reality, not just on rational, universal and objective truth. Ethics was a greater concern of social constructionists and therefore had significant implications in both practice and inquiry. Ethics is a central feature applied in clinical practice by a range of systemic family practitioners who have hugely influenced me (Anderson, Goolishian and Winderman, 1986; Kearney, Byrne and McCarthy, 1989; Andersen, 1991; Fruggeri et al., 1991; Anderson and Goolishian, 1992; Cecchin, 1992; Lax, 1992; Byrne and McCarthy, 1994; McCarthy, 1994; Byrne, 1995; McCarthy, 1995; White, 1995; Anderson, 1997).

The fifth province model influenced by the work of Maturana and Varela (1987) included the observer as part of a co-created social reality. Actions and responsibilities were in co-construction of the social reality of others. These ideas are as relevant for systemic practitioners now as they were for therapists then. This model kept in sight the care and caution required not to create realities which oppress or diminish the dignity of others: ‘... every human act has an ethical meaning because it is an act of constitution of the human world’ (Maturana and Varela, 1987, cited in Lang, Little and Cronen, 1990).

The extension of the fifth province model gave an elaboration of discourse and power with reference to how ‘the analysis of relationship as a discursive and dialectically mediated enclosure brings the power differentials in the system into view’ (Byrne, 1995, p.256). Through an increased focus on discourse and an elaboration of narrative theory they added a layer to Bateson’s complementary and symmetrical systems to show how ‘protagonists are affiliated with, or excluded from, other virtual or real relationships which function to articulate views specified by the discourse which upholds them, and of which they may be unaware’ (Byrne, 1995, p.256).

White (1995) also argued that medical discourses are dominant within the field of mental health and have a far-reaching and adverse impact. He insisted that people’s experiences are shaped in a negative way

through stigmatising processes such as diagnosis of ‘disorder’, leading to labelling and exclusion (see language/labelling). This is still evident in daily conversation within professional networks and public domains, where deficit talk is still very much present. Youth offending teams, for example, term young people who have committed a criminal offence as ‘young offenders’, children are termed ‘disruptive’, ‘lazy’, or ‘troublesome’; these are all everyday terms that can have a totalising effect. This becomes evident in neighbourhood work where the deficit language used seeps into the everyday language of professionals, adult residents, newspaper reports and has hidden from view almost completely the resources of the young people and their very real and valid concerns.

### **Doing and Action as Opposed to a ‘Spectator Theory of Knowledge’**

A distinction was made between doing and action and celebrating the state of being in certainty to the ‘spectator theory of knowledge’. Dewey (1929) highlights the timeless and enduring reality and order. He favours the view that we are not spectators but are all actors ‘actively and intelligently engaged in creating a degree of insurance despite the lack of assurance’ (Whyte, 1997). Uncertainty is an area of people’s lives where something important happens and may give valuable clues to their outlook and their resilience and resources. It is also a place where there is leverage for change; when I experience myself as an actor/participant it underscores that I have uncertainty in my own life. This is about how to understand the meaning of others and ‘I’ in relation to ‘other’. This understanding can be ‘experience-near’ or ‘experience-far’ (Kohut, 1971; Geertz, 1973). Many of the dominant professional theories, however, orientate towards the spectator view; they avoid uncertainty and are usually experience-far, while experience-near is the actor’s position. As actors together we are making meaning from what has gone before, because meaning depends on the capacity of others to know more or less what is coming next. This involves a certain amount of guesswork (Krause, 2001).

### **Dialogue in Practice and its Implications to my Inquiry**

I explore dialogue from a philosophical stance in inquiry in Chapter 4, drawing more on Bakhtin’s work (1984; 1986; 1993). The concept of dialogue in practice within the systemic field has been significant and brings into view embodied features of our interactions. Through the dialogical process ‘the aim is not agreement or consensus but rather a transversal of values and a pluralism of perspectives that replaces contradiction and exclusion’ (Byrne, 1995, p.258). This has reasserted a strong focus on the ethical nature

of inquiry, a position posited by many post-Milan teams working in a postmodern tradition (Murray, 1990; Andersen, 1991; White, 1995; Anderson, 1997).

This has been particularly relevant for the conversations I have participated in, especially in terms of enabling openings for many juxtaposed and conflicting stories in the process of talk with others, including individuals and between different groups. In Chapter 1 the influence of Andersen's (1996) reflecting conversations in communities and the direct influence of the work of Garcia and Guevara (2007) is apparent. Seikkula and Arnkil (2006), in their work on open dialogue, have made significant contributions to the exploration of dialogue and the implications of systemic practices in social networks. Augmenting dialogical approaches to the field of family therapy and beyond, they have produced a convincing evidence base in treating severe psychiatric problems. I apply these ideas as I enter everyday conversations in communities because these approaches combine a collaborative, relational ethos. Seikkula and Arnkil offer a way forward with 'open dialogue', suggesting we need to go beyond the existing approaches in terms of psychosocial work. These specifically relate to the wide-ranging applications across a range of meeting contexts and are not solely confined to network meetings. 'We make use of our experiences in Open and Anticipation Dialogues' (Seikkula and Arnkil, 2006, p.93).

In conversations in groups and with individuals in different settings, whether in a family therapy clinic when I practice family therapy or in various settings within a community context, I am paying attention to how I am creating the means of co-producing understandings within dialogical conversations. These suggest that structure is never a given or imposed, but that each meeting creates its own structure in open dialogue.

### **Implications of Social Constructionism to Inquiry: Attention to Micro- and Macro-Processes**

Close attention in social constructionist research and theory, and informing my inquiry significantly, is an engagement with macro- and micro-processes. Within the case vignettes in Chapters 8 and 9 I explore my positioning through a frame of sequencing moves that pays attention to micro- and macro-processes. Burr (2003) focuses on these two tendencies of interest, referring directly to Foucault's interest in power relations and how social structures, social relations and institutional practices are constructed through to macro-processes. Macro-processes are constructed through these practices or grand narratives in relation to larger systems of mental health, crime and punishment, class and our perception of gender and

sexuality (Foucault, 1973; 1975; 1977). Social constructionism at a micro-level encourages an exploration of how interpersonal and relational processes are dynamic ongoing activities that create our understanding of our social world and who we are within that.

### **Macro- and Micro-Positioning**

I use these ideas of micro- and macro-processes in sequencing moves and explore in conversation how I am positioning myself to respond to others and our ongoing reciprocal responses. Included is my internal dialogue and outer moves. I attempt to capture the sense of the constant movement between inner dialogue or what Vygotsky (1986) terms ‘blurred voices’ between living people in relationships. In Chapter 8 I am met with a collective professional voice, for example, as I join a conversation with a multi-professional group. Initially here the professional chorus requests ‘expert’ advice and that ‘something ... be done about “anti-social behaviour”’. As a systemic practitioner in this conversation I am wondering how to position in a way that opens a space for the more blurred voices to come to the foreground and allows for consideration of collaboration with a different others, community members whose views may be different to those of others. I examine my positioning to the macro-discourse and my immediate position to the language used suggesting a dominant narrative ‘about’ young people and their families and my process of repositioning through different questions and moves as I try to enable others to consider different positions. The metaphor of rock climbing is used to consider these embodied positions.

### **Exploring the Backdrop through an Embodiment Lens and Implications for my Positioning within Inquiry**

An orientation towards embodiment brings into view some obvious blind spots that Western knowledge claims have created. These embodied blind spots have had significant implications for how the world is seen and for how we as human beings are positioned and position ourselves in relation to language, knowledge, communication and human relationships. This invisible area has been shaped by the Cartesian idea that all understanding consists in forming and using appropriate symbolic representations and privileging human consciousness for sense-making. Ideas around intellectual development have roots reaching as far back as the work of Plato and Aristotle influencing Renaissance thinkers, Descartes and Leibnitz. These influences are still apparent in attempts to understand human conversation as an information exchange. While Wittgenstein (1953) countered these with a focus on conditioned knowledge and local logic in the sense of perceiving whole pictures or general logics (a universal language game)

efficient enough for knowing how to go on under present and apparent circumstances, bodies in this process remained invisible. This gap or blind spot of the human being as alive and embodied in sense-making in human relationships orientates me in a certain way as I attend to inquiry from within practice.

### **Embodiment in the Field of Family Therapy: Body Metaphors**

Embodiment has not featured as an area of interest within family therapy literature, although the use of body metaphors has. Body metaphors have been around and referred to for many years; the concept of homeostasis (Jackson, 1957), for example, was imported from earlier work in psychology exploring the ‘wisdom of the body’ (Cannon, 1932). This suggested a definition of homeostasis as the ability of an organism to maintain constancy in its inner environment. Body-based metaphors were further explored by Bertando and Toffanetti (2000), who refer to the family as ‘a body’, as a whole. This, however, may be seen as actually a departure from attending to the body and bodily aspects of interaction and even moving attention away from individual bodies (Betrando and Gilli, 2008). They suggested that although bodies remained central to the lived experience of therapists, who observed bodies in therapeutic practices in a practical way, this was rather inadvertent. The existence of bodies seemed invisible, even forgotten, when written about; theorising and conceptualising them had more of an abstract and intellectual nature with the description of therapeutic processes, encounters and episodes. Controlling bodily movements, including breathing, voice projection, tone and pace and evaluation of analogic clues before or during therapy, was practised by Jackson (1957), influenced by the work of Milton Ericson. This seemed to be a more strategic manoeuvre as opposed to focusing on the relational and embodied self and relationally reflexive responses and what was going on for the therapist.

Within the systemic therapy field body processes such as family sculptures and the metaphor of dance, for example, have been used; ‘the person is his dance’ (Minuchin and Fishman, 1981, p.88). Actions, interactions, movement and being all become one. This pointed towards and highlighted the body’s wisdom with these particular techniques that involved the disposition of bodies in space. Whilst there were opportunities to extend understandings of our own practices these were not fully seized and explored. The relationship to the particular metaphor of dance, for example, was used to describe therapeutic interaction that enhanced and perfected the various practice techniques such as sculpting. However, there were missed opportunities, in my view, to explore utilising these body metaphors to enter further into the detail of the self- and relationally reflexive space with the therapist as part of that interactive system. At most these body metaphors therefore were confined perhaps to tools.

## **Extending Possibilities Within Inquiry through an Embodiment Lens: The Shaping of my Inquiry Questions**

To some extent Wittgenstein's (1953) ideas of language and Shotter's (2010) introduction of a 'third kind of knowing' were not only markedly different to other positions taken on knowledge but also fuelled my particular interest in what I perceived as an inquiry blind spot. The focus placed by Shotter (2010) on being with people and responding in the moment is part of the sense-making when we are inside unique relationships. Both ideas are concerned with elevating the similar issue of how we relate to others and 'go on together' and this has informed my stance within my practice and inquiry significantly. The embodied emphasis Bakhtin (1984) places on dialogue is hugely significant in orientating my interest in exploring my embodied relational stance to inquiry, and in my use of an embodied metaphor of the climb, which has a personal meaning to me, to explore my reflexive positioning within the dialogical space of conversations.

... a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life, with his eyes, lips , hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life Bakhtin (1984, p.293).

Through an embodiment lens there appeared some blind spots and a route not usually taken in practice inquiry terms, and much self-questioning became necessary as I became clearer about my orientation within inquiry:

- How do I examine and extend understanding of my own positioning in interactions with others?
- How do I account for my own positioning in interactions with others?
- How does an attention to positioning enable us to reposition within our interactions and help us go on together?
- How do I create a way of going on?

Proceeding with very tentative steps and a great respect and admiration for those who have gone before stepping out boldly to make a difference, I continued along an orientation that required some new ways into practice inquiry, a route that was quite different.



## **How Does this Look in Practice: Embodiment and Positioning?**

### ***Vignette: a community residents meeting***

In the next vignette I am positioned as being fully engaged in the action and interaction in conversation with a group of parents. It relates to a moment when I felt deeply connected to Fatimah as she shared her personal situation with three other parents, Dounia, Arij and Janice, women from different cultural backgrounds, with different life experiences and ages. We had met two weeks before in dialogue about neighbourhood concerns. I had invited parents into a reflecting circle format to express not only concerns but also areas as community they were proud of in terms of their relationships and how they wanted to build and grow in their relationships in the community.

The community hall seemed to exude a warmth and I got there early to arrange the chairs in a circle and put out some light refreshments. The parents who joined noted this as ‘welcoming’. It was part of setting a context for dialogue and was to become part of the welcoming relational ritual space. This conversation was to go through different phases and movements as we spoke about different issues. I was curious about how parents experienced my positioning as we sat together and whether that was similar or different to what they experienced in other meetings they had been involved in. I was the only person in the group not of colour and I took the position of being a gracious guest respecting the parents as experts in their neighbourhood. I took a deliberate not-knowing position (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992) reflecting and inviting talk about the talk.

Helen: ‘How does this way of talking fit for you?’

Janice: ‘Being alongside each other in conversation about different worries and concerns felt like we were in something together. Also recognising the strengths and the resiliencies was uplifting.’

The whole group joined in the naming of the abilities we reflected on last time as every person contributed and named the qualities and shared what they appreciated about each other and others in the community: ‘Caring ... Resilient ... Sociable ... Open door ... Sharing ... Can be called on at any time ... Listening.’ It reminded me of the power and importance of ‘ability spotting’ and appreciating ‘the best of what is and what has been’ (Lang and McAdam, 1997, p.64). This invitation led to some valued qualities of members of the community being named.

Janice: 'It meant for each person to be a part of the community.'

As each quality was named I positioned myself as the amplifier of these qualities.

Arij: 'I like the open space to talk.'

Fatimah: 'Talking feels hopeful.'

As Fatimah said this I felt connected to her words and the way she spoke. Even these few words were uttered with her whole body as though they meant something important to her.

Helen: 'What is the relationship between resilience and hope?'

As I asked this question Dounia joined in with 'We all need hope'. The word 'hope' and being 'full of hope' triggered my immediate curiosity about the meaning and different positions each parent may have, and the multiple meanings around hope. This perspective would have led me to a line of questions to deconstruct and invite the possible multiple meanings and connections people may have around hope. This would have been systemic story creation as one way of moving around in the stories and descriptions of hope and to build a collective picture incorporating the many different features of hope. However there was something very compelling in the way that Fatimah uttered the words. There was both sadness and a fragility that was difficult to put into words and it stopped me in my tracks. I resisted the immediate pull towards a question that would have started the process of unpacking the word and yet it seemed significant to stay with hope. I checked this with everyone: 'Is it ok to stay with hope for a moment?' I went on to ask a slightly different and more relational question within the group that invited an embodied sense of what that meant for people.

Helen: 'As Fatimah talks about feeling hopeful what is it like to hear that for each of us here? Where do we hear that from?'

Arij: 'I feel things are really tough sometimes and those are the times you need to know you're not alone.'

As Arij said this she was looking directly at Fatimah and I wondered if the sense of Fatimah's fragility at this time was being picked up tacitly.

Janice: 'There's a lot of things going down on the streets with young people, police, knives and things and it's worrying as a mother, but I really feel that we have to stay hopeful that things will change.'

Talk at this stage moved onto generalised descriptions of violence and young people being constantly stopped by police. I was repositioned as I thought of different positions of membership within the community, what it was like from these different positions and how valued and appreciated each member felt from the different contexts of race, gender, culture, race, religion, age ability, education, and family members.

As a white woman in the group I was sensitive to the degree to which my understanding of the internal and systemic effect of racism on black and ethnic minority peoples in this community was of an abstract kind. My lack of experiential knowing of what it is like to be black and having no lived-in local knowledge came sharply into view and I felt very uncertain in this moment. I wondered about the local and prevailing politics that determine the social proximity of black people to white people and how they were being acted out.

This connects for me with being a climber tentatively moving with others, balancing uncertainty with a trust in the space and feeling a way to the next move in anticipation. Balance and creating 'a degree of insurance despite the lack of assurance' (Whyte, 1997) seemed to be part of this trust of the space and trusting the movement together. This level of presence and engagement in the process of climbing is akin to the embodied features, uncertainty and the trusting of processes and relationships that I experience in practice also, always learning from the engagement with others.

I offered my inner thoughts as a transparent reflection and checked with the group how they were with the way we were talking. I was given permission to go on as I asked Janice: 'Where are you hearing Fatimah's words from Janice? Where do others hear these words from? Is it from your position as a mother, as a black woman, from a particular family story or cultural or faith context?'

I felt a responsibility to acknowledge and act on some issues of inequality and discrimination for families: services had been cut, there was lack of job and training opportunities for young people which was highlighted by Janice whose eldest son had applied for hundreds of jobs in a space of a year. This reflected the effects and strains imposed by socio-economic factors and discrimination. Relationships were the highest context factor in this conversation that created a common ground about cares and hopes for loved ones. Generalised talk about worries of increasing violence amongst young people moved as I

created an invitation for curiosity, to talk from the different positions we hold in our families as mother, aunt and so forth, and to explore what was important in these relationships and what the vested interests in these relationships and concerns were. From these relational positions I also spoke from the 'I' position I occupy as an aunt concerned about my nephew's safety, and balancing concerns for a young person when he is out with friends late at night with his hopes and rights. I was not talking from a 'spectator' position (Dewey 1929).

Fatimah: 'I am a mother and just over two months ago I was at my son's bedside at hospital after he was attacked, beaten up.' [Pause]

In this pause I just thought how awful this is, and I connected to Fatimah's suffering. The pause had gravity: although short it seemed a powerful moment of silence that filled the whole hall and seemed to have a life and flow as it moved around the room and reverberated for everyone.

Dounia: 'That is awful ... any mother's worst dread ... it must have been awful being by your son's bedside?'

This significant event of the experience of sitting by the bedside of a sick loved one was something that was particularly poignant and very personal to me at that time. I was paying very close attention in this moment to everyone and also what was happening for me. Fatimah went on to graphically describe being by her son's bedside and thinking he was going to die. As she spoke tears welled up in her eyes and her voice weakened. Dounia was sitting next to Fatimah and she reached out to hold her hand. Bearing witness to Fatimah's story and her pain in that moment was poignant. She talked about feeling angry towards the young person who attacked her son and at the same time paralysed as she felt unable to help in any way. She described being at hospital and feeling as if all her influence as a mother was taken away. She felt that she had no say and did not understand fully what was going on. Suspended in this moment I too felt my eyes moisten. I did not know Fatimah and yet was connected and engaged through her sharing of her experience.

Fatimah: 'I felt disconnected as a person, I felt spoke down to and the police officer who came to see me I am sure was judging me and my family.'

Helen: 'Who have you drawn on for support in all of this? Who is around you and who helps at these difficult times?' [Pause]

I felt angered by some of the pathological talk that Fatimah and her family had experienced, the talk and views that distance and isolate people which take place in organisations and services. I was concerned about how negative descriptions become embedded or ‘inscribed’ within the subtleties of language and their different meanings.

Fatimah: ‘My sister came from Morocco to be with me but I was still feeling so ... well just a sense of ... of fearing you are going to lose your son.

Fatimah broke down in tears at this stage.

Helen: ‘Who else?’ [Pause] ‘What helped you feel reconnected and appreciated as a family? Who was around to help that process of reconnection and appreciation?’ [Pause]

I was drawing on Fatimah’s words to help bridge towards a different position of connection and appreciation of her and her family.

Fatimah: ‘Just having the space to talk and not being judged, I pray but I haven’t been to the mosque for a long time.’

Helen: ‘How can we show our appreciation of you Fatimah in this space as we listen? How are others in this moment with Fatimah?’

In this moment I felt the warmth oozing from Dounia’s squeeze of Fatimah’s hand followed by an embrace. There seemed to be a feeling of coming together, a joint responsibility for care in the group.

Helen: ‘I’m just wondering what it is like for you as you talk about this? And as we listen and wondering what the resources are here as you speak?’

At this stage I invited reflecting conversation as Dounia cradled Fatimah. I felt struck by my own emotion and experiencing a sense of the pain Fatimah was going through. It seemed to be an ‘experience-near’ moment (Kohut, 1971; Geertz, 1974a) for everyone in the room. I reflected on how we were constructing our connections that bound us in this conversation and how we were connecting in an embodied way.

We were all part of being inside this unique happening and unique relationship (Shotter, 2010), being together and responding in the moment as part of the sense-making. With increasing awareness of the

micro-moves, gestures, and facial expressions of others and myself, my eyes met with Fatimah's as she looked up. There was a communication of awe, admiration and encouragement for her that went beyond words. The question I asked belied the look and my feeling of awe, daunted and being moved in this moment.

Helen: 'I wonder what new things are coming from this talk together?' [Pause]

I was resting in the uncertainty and yet in a reassured way within this pause. It was not so much the questions asked which seemed simple and straightforward but the dialogue and the interactions that were not all about words but the warmth of the gestures, the openness, the being together in uncertainty that seemed to reap a huge wealth of resourceful sharing.

Fatimah: 'Coming together like this helps, there's new things that come to light as I hear from other parents, aunts and uncles and family members how they are living and experiencing some of the issues that young people struggle with. I hadn't really thought of identity and what that means for my son and his friends.'

As Fatimah spoke, I could see Arij intently listening and engaged in what she was saying. Arij looked the youngest woman in the group and was there in her capacity as sole carer and older sister of her 10-year old brother.

There was a pause, in which Arij looked up as if to speak and then looked down. I gently encouraged Arij and beckoned her to speak with an encouraging nod and a hand gesture, as if welcoming her into the talk.

Helen: 'What is this like hearing Fatimah's response Arij?'

Arij: 'I attend the same mosque as Fatimah. And it is interesting we pray together but it's strange how we can be together and not see people or what is going on. I care for my younger brother who is ten and he is going through these struggles with identity. There are some nice social gatherings but I was thinking about maybe making opportunities to come together and talk about these things that matter in support of each other like this.'

Fatimah responded by expressing an appreciation of the support from being in the presence of other mothers and the mosque became a potential space of support. I continue to I shared my appreciation of what I had been party to in the process, the quality of listening, of attending to each other in words and

actions and the resourcefulness of the group. As parents they went on to join together and encouraged other parents to join in dialogue and explore different potential ways of bringing different groups together. Dounia went on to host some meetings in her home and I was invited back to join with the parents in a number of reflective circles.

### **Reflection: Where this Points in Terms of Inquiry into Systemic Positioning**

The process of this episode and set of positions, and how I was experiencing these positions at different stages of this conversation, shifted between ways of thinking of these bigger cultural considerations and at the same time was hugely influenced by the dialogical orientation (Bakhtin, 1981). This in my view brings into focus the embodied reflexive features of dialogue in a process of understanding how to relate and how it occurs spontaneously between voices spontaneously attuning to events in their surroundings. This was happening here in the presence of these parents, and it was being achieved as a local discursive activity, in full engagement at every stage.

In this interaction I was moving, in terms of my positioning, between the effects of the bigger grand narrative and the smaller local story, each requiring consideration. The work of Davies (1999) helps with understanding the potential for separation of identity and body and also the risk of creating a decrease in continuity, in relatedness, and in the individual materials and narratives through which we exist and appear to others and ourselves. Davies talks of bodies as texts (in)scribed and incorporated as human in the folds of one discursive landscape of another Davies (1999). She suggests that in the process of awareness of 'being embodied' we have little practice in observing or articulating. Indeed the processes that show the vulnerability of existence such as ageing, sickness and death are part of the embodied experience.

It reminded me of humbling and moving moments on a climb, appearing in waves of awareness, and times of feeling overawed and uncertain while climbing and being struck with a sense of appreciation of my fellow climbers and our joint venture within the struggle and the impact of life events. Shifting our positions; attending closely to details and paying complete attention to noticing and feeling a way forward whilst being able to step or lean back in order to see a bigger picture that informs and connects people, describes my experience of appreciating this conversational space as we journey through it together. A position of uncertainty seemed to open a space for generating dialogue about very real human concerns and also illuminate the resilience of each conversational companion. It positions each person as an expert

in their own experience. This episode and my reflections made me curious about how our collective knowing 'how to go on' manifests.

This conversation raised questions for me about embodied tacit features of our knowing: Does knowing of a third kind (Shotter, 2010) point more to a sensual knowing that both becomes intuitive from our lived events and is also shaped in the moment? This is what I would term embodied, reflexive, relational expertise; a relational knowing paradigm whereby all areas of a person's experiences are considered to be interrelated. Together, sharing knowledges creates what Frank (1995) describes as a process of inscription, a holistic process which includes physical, mental, emotional and spiritual responses. As a systemic practitioner my position is one of paying close attention to these relational positions, collaborating and creating a space through invitations for reflection: to stop, to look around and notice what is happening in the micro-embodied gestures and facilitate relational ways of going on together.

In the next chapter I explore more specific preferences and biases in relation to the conceptual and practice tools that attract me. These are considered in the light of personal and professional informing contexts.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SYSTEMIC PRACTICE AND INQUIRY INFLUENCES AND PERSONAL INFORMING CONTEXTS**

#### **Systemic Practice Influences ‘Tools’ Within a Social Constructionist Frame**

This chapter, given the hugely divergent fields within postmodern literature and some of the developing ideas and concepts that shaped systemic practice, locates me more specifically within a vast community. Approach, Method and Technique (AMT) (Burnham, 1992) is helpful as a framework for thinking both in practice and inquiry and this is applied more specifically to inquiry in Chapter 4. The ideology and theoretical propositions covered in the last chapter I would place at the level of approach within this framework; they show how a systemic approach has evolved under social constructionism and is interwoven within systemic practice. The shift from questioning what reality is to how realities are being created is significant; the act of being informed and informing means multiple positions are being negotiated throughout the process. Questions about the holding of particular views and positions and their implications for subsequent actions come under scrutiny. The move from the domain of abstraction (reason) into the domain of action, choice and ethics, questioning the ways in which we generate knowledge and participate in social encounters, is significant as episodes of communication, identities, relational and cultural rules and patterns are constituted in language and as contextual sites for meaning (Cronen and Pearce, 1985). This moves us into a creative domain, not simply a representational one (McNamee and Gergen, 1992; Burr, 1995).

The passions and prejudices of the persons, including the systemic practitioner, come under close scrutiny therefore within a systemic approach, and in this chapter I allow my inclination towards some theoretical stories over others inform the positions I adopt in practice encounters and make explicit here. The strong theoretical and practice influences within each of the conversational encounters in this inquiry include reflecting conversations (Andersen, 1987; 1991; 1996; Garcia and Guevara, 2007) and positioning (Davies and Harré, 1990) and are not revisited in this chapter. The methods and techniques mentioned by

Burnham (1992) include a range of different identifiable activities, kinds of questions, games and ways of talking that have become characteristic of systemic practice.

## **Situating Myself in Inquiry and Practice**

I am situated as both practitioner and inquirer, and acknowledge that there are some clear challenges inherent in holding both positions in this inquiry. I attempt to address these in a range of ways. The research communities I draw upon are from established fields of auto-ethnographic and systemic research that acknowledge that lives are lived from inside the experience and activity of living and are told also from inside this position. Researchers within an auto-ethnographic and systemic research field challenge traditional taken-for-granted claims and ideas about acquiring reliable and valid knowledge by an independent distant observer/researcher adhering more specifically to discourses that aim at certainty and consistency with definite findings and coherent stories (Gergen, 1999). Positioning within a post-positivist qualitative research practice inquiry lens, auto-ethnographic reflexive researchers and writers such as Ellis (2007), see novel-like writing as a method that is evocative and analytical with the ability to stir emotional responses. Therefore I try to write in this manner and this is part of my methodology, as detailed in Chapter 4.

As an inquirer I become also a describer, painting a portrayal through a representation of events I am part of, having experienced these events as a systemic practitioner and as a participant. My inquiry position therefore is subjective, and there is an expectation for me to express my interest and my inevitable prejudice; with the intention of minimising the power imbalance in knowing between the inquirer and inquiry participant. This reflexive position remains under constant questioning and demands a rigour about being a subject with potential for bias. By rigour I mean establishing and maintaining a thoroughness, abundance and clarity throughout the inquiry process. Rigour is cited as an inquiry criterion and I demonstrate how this is evidenced in Chapter 10. The inquiry aims to demonstrate a rigorous transparency about my biases and informing contexts both personal and professional and these are made explicit in this chapter and in the dialogical excerpts throughout. Reflections are in perpetual motion and writing becomes part of this process and this is also evaluated in Chapter 10.

The inquiry reflects on my practice and the process of inquiry is after the event. Within the thesis I clearly delineate the times when I am speaking as a systemic practitioner in the dialogical excerpts, and when I offer reflections I am moving into inquirer positions. However as a systemic practitioner I am also constantly reflecting and inquiring into my practice and therefore these positions become interchangeable

and merged at times. Part of the challenge is to acknowledge the multiple positions as a therapist, community member, and daughter, for instance, as all are different positions that may be drawn upon dependant on the context and ethical considerations in the moment. Ethical considerations form the foundation for both my practice and this inquiry; a close attention to ethics includes an acknowledgment of the presence of my biases, preferences and blind spots. These may present themselves as useful and unexpected gifts to draw on, as the example illustrated later in this chapter illustrates; I draw upon an in-the-moment connection to my father that I share in dialogue with a group of parents to facilitate connections for others. This confluence and the tentative moves of being an inquirer and subject at times is considered throughout the inquiry process and is reflected upon further in the final chapter.

The rock climbing metaphor is one of the methods I aim to use to enable myself to view my practice from another place completely; being in experience and inquiring from this inside experience I can pull my inner and outer moves and responses apart and scrutinise them.

## **Systemic Practice and Rock Climbing**

The act of climbing, and a climber's approach to the act of climbing itself, I liken to being a systemic practitioner and the approach to the act of doing systemic practice in a therapy clinic, a network meeting, individual or group conversation with professionals and non-professionals. In climbing, part of being ready is ensuring essential equipment, being practised in moves and having an approach that is open to different movements, ready to shift into different positions moment by moment. I approach each encounter with an open-mindedness, poise, readiness, flexibility, attention to safety, and an appreciation of fellow climbers and environmental factors. I am poised in readiness to move and position myself in different ways, to feel a way that fits with the contours and nature of the rock face, to respond to the changing dynamics. I am hoping to achieve a flow of movement with others as we move together connected by the rope that ensures our safety and enables us to take risks.

Systemically there are a range of different methods, frameworks and techniques that provide valuable resources in their application in an everyday sense and for everyday use in conversations that have potential for therapeutic effect. I liken this to a climber's equipment, their climbing gear, tools such as harnesses and clips to assist in the process of climbing. These are drawn upon when needed, or adapted and utilised depending on the context and the requirements of the climb and surroundings, so that there is a fit at any given time. This readiness also ensures adequate provisions are made for safety, especially

when many different variables and factors may be encountered. Similarly I also have systemic ‘gear’ that can be likened to what is referred to as methods and techniques (Burnham, 1992), as described earlier.

I use these methods and tools to enhance my positioning to enable others to extend a range of positions and I am hoping to extend my reach outwards to open opportunities within conversations. This was implicit in the conversations with the parents seen in the last chapter and also in all the conversations with groups and individuals in communities. There are many internal dialogues and different influences on each climber as they respond to the challenges, ebbs and flows of the journey together. There are multiple features and qualities required of a systemic practitioner that can be likened to what is also required of a rock climber including the need for flexibility, a range of movement, agility to position and reposition and the ability to extend and reach to connect and create movement for self and others. These features are enhanced with training, experience and practice and become part of both the systemic practitioner’s and rock climber’s resources. Creating a poise that prepares the systemic practitioner – and equally the rock climber – for any number of responses or moves that may be required means the relationship between people, whether in conversation or in the act of climbing, is being attended and responded to. Both the systemic practitioner and the rock climber will be noticing and responding to the unfolding situation and terrain in the moment, and this is always going to be complex and involve ongoing learning. What may appear to an observer as an aesthetic move or sequence of moves may have become implicit understanding to the climber and has been achieved through practice, training, ongoing learning and extending beyond a particular zone of comfort, and this is similar to the process of the systemic practice journey.

### **The Rope: Ethics as Constant, Ongoing and Woven into the Fabric of Systemic Practice**

Ethical considerations are constantly addressed and seen as ongoing points of orientation within systemic practice; they create the rope that connects all. There are orientating questions such as ‘When I think or act in this way, am I accepting, challenging, reinforcing or subverting existing power interests and am I perpetuating the problem or dissolving it?’ (McCarthy, 1996). The importance of such positions is reinforced by many social constructionist theorists and clinicians who work from a social constructionist position (Gergen, 1992; Shotter, 1993). Attention is also paid to how accounts are given within both practice and inquiry.

## **Relational Responsibility and Reflexivity: Special Tools for Ensuring Ethical Responsibility**

A central feature of systemic practices is reflexivity, especially self-reflexivity. This has been a strong orientation for me in my practice and is highlighted especially in my section on systemic practice in schools.

As well as being a practice tool, reflexivity is also one of the most important conceptual tools (Burnham, 1992, p.17). The ability to be constantly self-reflexive about our theories, prejudices and favourite stories informs our therapeutic and systemic practice. I connect this to the constant stretching and keeping supple that I need as a climber to practice. Constantly being able to move to reach is part of climbing, and reflexivity is connected in my view to the work I have to do on myself to keep flexible and open to others in practice. Reflexivity is ‘that which turns back upon, or takes account of itself’, taking into account ‘the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on the investigation’ (OED, p.476).

We can be reflexive about conversations at the level of exploring an episode, for example in exploring the cultural, family, gender, or ethnic stories around an episode. Self/other reflexivity is important in exploring the language we use and its effect on others. Many professionals use ‘public’ language in front of clients (Anderson, 1997) and a ‘private’ language when they are not with the client, attracting accusations of being ‘intellectual’, ‘academic’, or ‘nasty’ (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992, p.58).

A self-reflexive stance questions what it means to me to be informed by different contexts at any point in time, as ‘a being in practice’ and ‘being in practice’. In the process of practice and inquiry I have reflected upon these personal drivers and passions in those practices and interactions that are revitalising and reconnecting people. For example I am curious about the connecting theme, for me, both personally and professionally, of social justice, and I reflect on what is informing this further in this chapter.

## **Reflexivity and Dialogue**

Pearce (1999) talks about ‘reflexive self-awareness’ and what is being made in the process of social interaction. This has helped me to orientate towards maximising opportunities and creating invitations within each conversation to take self-reflexive positions in a range of different ways. Everything is

relational and identity is dialogical in character, extending beyond itself to other partners in dialogue. Through 'dialogue and dialogic' interaction, other persons participate in the process of co-creating and inviting the other into a relationship (Bakhtin, 1990). In the context of relationships, therefore, all are involved in the shaping and construction of identity (Vygotsky, 1978). 'Knowledge of the third kind' refers to a relational knowledge constructed in the interactions between persons (Shotter and Billig, 1998). In relationships and language orientated by dialogue, both relationships and human life are perceived as being engulfed within a dialogical space in which 'open-ended dialogue' takes place (Bakhtin, 1984).

## **Curiosity**

Curiosity became a valuable idea and tool that evolved through Cecchin's (1987) critique of his earlier work on neutrality. In his 'invitation to curiosity' he argued that we cannot be neutral, and one of the signs of not being neutral is when the therapist has a physical manifestation of some kind such as headaches, perspiration, back pain. This connects for me to my exploration of embodiment and what is happening in the moment in a sensate way. By remaining curious we remain open to what is going on around us and to what is going on for 'I' and 'other' in the interactive space of conversation, and that includes the therapist and systemic practitioner: 'interactions with us should facilitate questioning our own premises' (Cecchin, 1987, p.412). It means we can never be certain: there are always more descriptions, connections and interactions going on that we are not aware of. A stance of curiosity helps us to question all our stories, theories and responses. This has helped me orientate through the complexity, uncertainty, dynamism and open-endedness of conversations.

## **Reflexive Curious Positioning**

I take a position which acknowledges my reflexive stances both in inquiry and practice, and I elaborate upon this in the next chapter within my philosophical orientation. One meaning I make of this is not to look for universal truths or facts as, in a modernist frame, I am standing in a participant's perspective; both are changing and being changed by the conversation, as part of the process of enquiry (Chen and Pearce, 1995, p.78). A curiosity about multiple understandings of the multiple realities is a key feature of systemic positioning: words create worlds and truth is social construction. In adopting such a position I

show how I am attempting to make sense of theory (meaning-making), that is informing practice, in this chapter, and equally how practice informs the way I am making meaning, especially in relation to others.

### **Dream Talk (Future, Hopes)**

Working with people's dreams is not the same as creating goals; it is not constructed in steps, actions and plans, but is about 'tuning into the creative grammars that dreaming will bring forth' (Lang and McAdam, 1997, p.7). I have worked with young people on their dreams, and have found they allow mutability and flexibility. There is power, energy and life that comes from this talk which was pertinent to the conversation with a group of young people I was working with following concerns about fighting, graffiti and other behaviour deemed 'anti-social'. Using dreams, imagining and exploring the senses and relationships that emerge, takes us into an 'emergent language game' (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.197). Earlier conversations with the professional network, the resident groups and the young people are described within a framework of sequencing moves in chapters 8 and 9, where there was an initial sense that nothing would change. Within every interaction there are possibilities for new rules to emerge, says Wittgenstein (1953, p.36). Everyday ordinary communication often fluctuates, and this means new 'rules' can be created.

### **Following the Grammar and Language People Offer in Conversation**

In terms of my positioning I 'follow the person's grammar and language' (Hedges, 2005, p.115) in conversation, as illustrated in my participation in and curiosity around 'hope' when Fatimah raised it in conversation with the group of parents. It also leads me to join and explore unique and rich metaphors with others. Examples of this are further illustrated in a conversation with Mohamed in Chapter 7, the flow, and in sequencing moves in Chapters 8 and 9. Metaphor is examined within a philosophical orientation to inquiry, and I explore how it informs a position of embodied reflexivity through the use of the climbing metaphor more extensively in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Metaphors in practice and those arising in conversation with others are considered in discussion in the final chapter.

### **Attending to Issues of Social Difference**

Paying close attention to contexts of culture, race, sexuality, education, class, and abilities, and being mindful of the difference between being constructed by others and being able to play a part in one's own construction, in relation to the issue of power, is central in each of the conversations I was in with others. For information about what systemic practitioners draw on, the frame referred to as the Social GRAAACCEESS (Burnham, 1992; Burnham, 1993; Roper-Hall, 1997; Burnham, 2009) is a helpful mnemonic for the personal and professional contexts informing our encounters with others. It encourages me to ask colleagues in and outside the systemic field how we do social difference and diversity in our relationships with others. A sensitivity to respond to each of the contexts of our social differences and diversity is central to a position that questions, acknowledges and attends to positioning regarding relationships, and how power and influence are acted into, within, and out of these relationships. How does being a professional influence people's identity and views of the world?

Seeing practice through a culturally sensitive lens prompts me to ask myself a range of questions, especially as many of the conversations are with families and young people of colour and from different cultural heritages to mine. Some have alternative preferred languages and practices within multiple different contexts such as the range of different of faith communities within one local neighbourhood, which therefore leads me to constant questioning in a self- and relationally reflexive way:

- How am I ensuring that I am practicing to encourage participation and inclusive engagement?
- How am I facilitating those participating in this conversation to exercise their collective power to create new environments and new forms of social life in relationships that are conducive to everyone's well-being as a 'cultural-performatory activity'? (Newman and Holzman, 1996/2006).

Reading Wittgenstein created all sorts of openings for me. He advocated opening our eyes to see what is right in front of us: 'don't think but look' (Wittgenstein, 1953). This close scrutiny when we are thinking about social difference requires taking a self-reflexive stance and paying attention to what 'I'/'we' bring to any encounter. Burnham (1992) also pays close attention to this. Without oversimplifying this, it is about exploring/being interested in and talking about cultural experiences with others in a tangible way.

## **Appreciative Inquiry**



Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1990, as described by Lang and McAdam, 2000) gives me practices and methods that enhance possibilities for people and provide a basis for moral and ethical practice in varied areas. It has many dimensions which grow from the formative, creative power of language. Language is seen as creating and doing, and is an aesthetic issue as ‘we become morally responsible for the way we describe people and how we relate to them to create possibilities to live fruitful futures’. How do we bring our awareness and sensitivity into our own relationships? Exploring it from the inside (being in the experience) and appreciating the differences people bring is something I try to pay attention to. I have also aimed at having a starting position of positive regard for people, respecting their lived experiences and the different and valuable types of knowledge people bring: ‘people need to be affirmed; they don’t need problem analysis’ (Cooperrider, 1990). Reflecting conversations, as discussed in Chapter 1 (Andersen, 1987; 1990), and Garcia and Guevara’s (2007) response to community and wider political issues appreciatively position all those involved.

## **Influences from Outside the Systemic Field: the Philosophy of Restorative Practices**

### ***Restorative Circles***

There is a whole philosophy of talking in circles that goes beyond and dates further back than the association with restorative practices in the criminal justice field which limits the view somewhat and detracts from the wider philosophy (Mahaffey and Newton, 2008). The philosophy has not been exclusively for problem-solving or addressing offending in any way, as it has also been adopted in the field of criminal justice. The idea of circles is to open a dialogue; ‘circle time’ in schools, for example, is not about therapy or problem solving but about exploring issues that matter to communities. It is done in the context of care for children with an appreciation of the role of social development in a child’s experience (Ballard, 1982; Robinson and Mahaffey, 2012). There are similarities with Andersen’s reflecting teams (1996); positions of power are thoughtfully considered and talk is encouraged from a position of appreciation, acceptance and encouragement. This appreciative lens shifts the focus away from blame and judgement to bringing forth achievements, skills, qualities and abilities (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999). As an educational resource it encourages the ability to listen, taking turns in talk, and respecting difference.

### ***Personal and professional influences***

## *Cultural heritage*

My cultural heritage comes from Irish immigrant parents who moved to Britain and settled in London, alongside families from different parts of Africa, the Caribbean, Ireland, Spain and Portugal. This informs part of my passions. My father was both hardworking and playful and came from Belfast, a city torn by division and struggles. My mother came from a rural and ruggedly beautiful part of Donegal in north-west Ireland; her intuitive wisdom and huge resilience transcended her own struggles and losses and drew others towards her warmth, wit and wisdom. My parents came from very different worlds and had very different experiences of growing up. My family fostered in me a deep and abiding sense of a historical, political and cultural past and the struggles, loss, sadness, joy and song that were all part of that. Talk and telling stories through tales and songs and playing out the dramas of life have all been an important part of my heritage. As a child I was hungry to listen; I learnt the art of listening with a vigilant ear.

My Irish roots and the traditions interwoven in that have provided insights for me, like the cultures we all carry, and I have been moved and touched by connections that have seemed to sometimes spring from within me – the part of myself that is older than I am. I have tapped into some of the possibilities of the exploration sensed from childhood.

My parents, like many other migrants, experienced the dominant attitudes and views of the day that placed ethnic minorities, including Irish Catholic families, on the margins in many ways. I was brought up in an inner city working class area, within a diverse ethnic community with varied cultural heritages, an emerging culture that will have been very different to that of our parents. I feel I had an immeasurable advantage with this childhood and youth spent on the edges of the mainstream. My early childhood was experienced in a multicultural neighbourhood where families from different corners of the world lived alongside each other connected by live events of struggles, faith, celebrations, journeys of immigration and hopes for the future. In many ways we were on the borderlands of society, ambiguous places in which different cultures and histories meet, where the familiar and the diverse mix and challenge one another. They can be mysterious and uncomfortable spaces: they can be a ‘frontier from which the new is opened up; of shaping and being shaped.’ Freire (2001) talks of giving himself to the experience of living with what is different without fear and without prejudice. As I became a young adult the growing awareness of institutional discrimination enraged me, and a sense of my own cultural heritage and social injustices impassioned me.

My personal and professional drivers informed my choice to do systemic training and my attraction to certain texts such as *The Fifth Province* (McCarthy, 1994; 2010). It resonated also within conversations, with Fatimah's story for example, of her family 'coming through together' at a time of being by a loved one's bedside. These resonances are about life and lived events as families pull through struggles and losses. *The Fifth Province* offered a way through feelings and relationships as a focal point and a force that connects. The Taoists use the term *pu*, meaning 'uncarved wood', as a metaphor for simplicity and purity – for wood that has not been carved has no set form and thus infinite potential. In many ways these moments of connection have a similar spirit of receptivity and sense of possibility, of shaping and being shaped.

### ***Professional choices***

This experience of living in communities, and the different threads that informed my choices and positions, finds expression in the appreciation of resiliences in people, families and communities, in the experiences that unite us as human beings, the common experiences of loss, family, struggle and faith (for some). It has sensitised me to issues of social justice and informed my positioning across contexts. This include my reactions to talk and actions that have a diminishing effect on people, especially in marginalised, minority groups, and those who tend to be socially excluded by systems. Labelling theory was one of my earlier theoretical influences in my social work training in the youth justice field many years ago. It linked to the generative power of terminology – such as, for example, 'deviant behaviour' – being successfully shaped and defined as such by those social groups with the power to make and enforce these definitions (Gove, 1980). It is not inherent in the usage itself but in the response of others to the usage. Once labelled by the reaction of others, a person's 'self-image' becomes shaped by the label bestowed on him/her.

My professional choices throughout my adult life to live and work in inner cities, a space that is rich in difference, diversity, life and energy, has been informed by these experiences. Through social work, youth and community work, practice within the field of probation and my current systemic practice and systemic practice training, I have searched for models that made sense of the complexities, movement, unpredictability and chaos of 'life' and would assist people to move on. Without articulating it as such at the time, and perhaps being unaware of it, that search had been connected to looking for ways that open space between people to have dialogue, generate connections and allow people to talk about differences, hopes, needs and aspirations in varied contexts of work with parents, children and young people in the

fields of youth and community work, youth justice, and, currently in practice, the context of a child adolescent mental health (CAMHS) both in a clinic and in community settings.

### ***Professional systems and language***

Experiences from across wider systems and organisations have attuned me to the challenges, costs and constraints of operating within dominant and single world views, and the structures, processes and languages embedded within the different organisations and services of education, health and social care. A systemic framework opens a way of understanding different world views. Attached to these are the different cultural practices that stem from them. An approach of focusing only on the behaviour of a child or young person without real awareness, sensitivity and responsiveness to contexts of social difference and diversity is discriminatory, and yet contextualising socially and culturally is not a fundamental aspect of education, or health training for example.

### **Questioning the Taken for Granted of the Systems I Am in**

In reflecting on the professional roles I have undertaken I consider other positions held in society, many of which fall into distinctive areas, such as a builder, teacher, nurse. Certificates are produced to confirm the requisite knowledge that people bring to practice in a particular field. What happens to the other types of knowledge that people bring in their interactions with others, and how can we bring these into view? Teaching is one field where the macro-ethnicity and the micro-ethnicity reflect a somewhat linear world view, and the field of health is another. Reflecting from a position as a systemic practitioner in a mental health system makes me question the wider notion of health and well-being and the language and systems within that are steeped in 'cause and effect'. A medical model within the system of health consists of top-down structures with decision-making processes firmly held by the few in positions of authority. People are identified as being unwell, with a disorder, and the process is symptom-led. Health professionals do not generally consider a person's spiritual or social well-being.

More specifically, within the field of mental health we offer as systemic therapists alternative ways of entering and viewing and working with the system from just this cognitive, behavioural and emotional functioning. We see the child in the context of their systems. Entering into the space of each of the

conversations there is a degree of expectation in being presented as a ‘professional expert’ brought in to ‘fix something’, or to ‘fix’ the young person or child. What was immediately apparent in some of the attitudes from both the adult professionals and non-professionals, was that they were getting into fixed positions that became ‘stuck’. This is detailed in the dialogical exertions and reflections in sequencing moves.

Systems such as health and mental health services, where the medical mode prevails, emphasise the vulnerabilities of existence such as ageing, sickness and death, which are perceived as ‘problems’ that should be ‘solved’ and overcome. It is symptom-and-treatment focused, structured around medical treatment, operations and therapy. If we deny or suppress the normalcy of these experiences, however, this could mean we are also less experienced. Indeed the medical model has implications for therapeutic practices that are wide-ranging. Organic processes become isolated from their contexts by being hospital-centred – for example, conception and birth, sickness and death. From the moments of entry through to our exit from life the human being is today heavily dependent upon medical technical equipment. The patient is increasingly deprived of authority over his or her own body. Fatimah’s experience illustrated this, and showed how knowledge is seen in a linear way. It is from this type of vantage point that pathological talk, such as the language of ‘disorder’, becomes embedded, and only serves to distance and isolate people. Negative descriptions become ‘inscribed’ (Davies and Frawley 1994) within the subtleties of language and different meanings. The body in this view is seen in functional and technical terms and analysed accordingly. Davies and Frawley’s poignant description (1994) of bodies as texts ‘(in)scribed and incorporated as human in the folds of one discursive landscape or another’ inspired my passion in this inquiry for ways of bringing the body centre stage. They suggest that in the process of awareness of ‘being embodied’ we have had little practice in observing or articulating. It is this I wish to counter.

## **The Theme of Social Justice**

One of the consistent themes running throughout all of my practices, and one that is also personal to me, is that of social justice. This is significant in terms of how these personal and professional biases and stories and contexts sometimes manifest as a ‘gut reaction’, a sense that ‘this feels wrong’, and these are potentially resourceful for me in different practice contexts working within a range of different systems.

Being attuned to a professional jargon and ways of seeing and acting provides me with active antennae. Using these embodied senses as an alert marker that indicate a need to position around deficit and

‘pathological’ talk that has such a distancing and isolating effect, I explore how this resource might be used to also highlight some of our own professional blind spots, assumptions or biases.

## **Attention to Language**

I have been drawn towards systemic practitioners who have attended closely to language and narrative as providing a way through some of the first order systems and ways of speaking within those systems. In witnessing different types of adversarial communication patterns with one another in my interactions with professionals and families alike, despite some very well meaning and best intentions, I have found some children and their families are recruited into pessimistic narratives about some individuals and possibly their families. These problem-saturated narratives (White, 1990; 1993a) form the texture and fabric backdrop ‘landscape’ of much of the interpersonal communication that is played out. Attention was paid to the idea of the ‘therapist’ working with the ‘client’ to find where there has been an exception to an original dominant story, ideas of which were developed within the narrative work of Epston and White (1991) who sought ‘unique outcomes’, finding the exception that does not fit with the dominant story within the narrative work.

At a societal level blaming discourses are in abundance (Srivastava and Cooperrider, 1999). The media have a lot to answer for in terms of fanning these types of discourses, and even within the field of therapy terms such as ‘low self-esteem’ and ‘troubled or disruptive behaviours’ are almost taken for granted. There are many more that describe people in terms of their alleged deficiencies. A ‘spiralling cycle of deficit terminology’ that ‘discredits the individual drawing of attention to problems, shortcomings, or incapacities’ is created as a way that professionals attempt to understand, diagnose, assess and treat a child with undesirable behaviour. The whole domain of diagnostic criteria which any CAMHS team or any family therapist faces is precisely what we are not about but which nevertheless introduces language based very firmly on labelling the child in one way or another. This has the result of reducing the child to a number of ‘symptoms’. However we negotiate ‘going on’ with the family; this is only our starting point.

## **Practice and Personal Influences that Bring me back to Questions that Inform my Practice**

- How do I make the most of opportunities within everyday conversations for therapeutic effect?
- How can reflective spaces within conversations be created to consider self in relation to other?

- What are the adjustments I make to accommodate and attend to issues of social difference and diversity?

This is in terms of awareness and sensitivity to issues of social difference including gender, race, age, ability, ethnicity, education, equality, culture, class, sexuality, and spirituality.

**Figure 1: *Systemic Practice and Inquiry: The Gear***

<b>SYSTEMIC GEAR</b>	<b>EXAMPLE</b>	<b>PURPOSE</b>
<b>Reflexivity</b> <b>Reflections on</b> <b>conversations</b> <b>(Reflecting teams)</b>	How is this going? What are we making here? How are you making sense of this conversation so far? How am I responding to you?	Positioning person in different role. Invitations to hear new stories and the multiple layers of stories. Create conversational space.
<b>Dream/future talk</b>  <b>Dialogue</b>	How would you like things to be different?  How are we going to do this together?  What are we co-creating?	Shift away from ‘problem talk’. Foregrounding energising stories of desires, dreams, hopes. Exploring what is important for each person.  ‘We talk’
<b>Positioning – use of ideas of space</b>  <b>Shifting around these, introducing other people’s perspectives</b>	How do others understand it?  How are others affected?  What are things like from that space/perspective.	Allows the individual to explore issues and events from multiple perspectives.
<b>Appreciative inquiry</b> <b>(of which dreams and future talk are a part)</b>	When did you do things differently?  How would you like others to see you?	To draw upon young person’s stories of strength and ability. To move away from some of the fixed stories of deficit into thinking about personal resources and strategies for change.

The table gives a broad idea of my biases in practice, the types of questions I pose and their purpose, in order to give a feel of how I am being informed, the approach I bring to each conversation, and the types of ‘tools’ I may bring. More importantly it points to an area that is missing, a blind spot that has been largely invisible or not attended to, namely embodiment, embodied features as a sensate being in practice.

I would add, therefore, these types of question ‘tools’ to this table, questions addressing how we go on together.

- How is this conversation space for us?
- What are you/I/we drawing on?
- What is your sense? How would you describe it?
- How can we reflect on our experiences and how does that inform our going together?
- What would you like to take from this and build on as we go forward?

Returning to the metaphor of the climb, the gear is a part of a multi-faceted, multi-complex picture. Aspects and personal and professional features inform me in recursive relationships. Like the variety of climbing gear I draw on as I position in the activity of climbing, I draw on systemic gear that comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. It is used and applied to the grooves and contours of rock to enable and assist each climber in their moves. Finding a fit in positioning with others positions, amidst decisions about ethics and safety as to how to go on, is complex and uncertain and reflects my experience, at times, of being in conversations within community contexts; trusting in the process, the abilities of others and myself to be responsive and attentive. This sometimes calls for taking unusual positions in the moment and doing something different to create ongoing movement for others.

The next case vignette illustrates a different position that was informed by my being struck by a fleeting connection that came upon me unrelated, fragmented and personal through the smell of pipe smoke as I entered a primary school. I reflect on the embodied significance in terms of my personal connections to this smell and how this informed my positioning when I met a group of parents.

The significance of ‘the moment’ and deconstructing happenings in my internal dialogue and outer movements as I respond to others in the different conversational moments are explored in the practice vignettes throughout.



## **Practice Vignette: The Smell of Pipe Smoke**

### ***Context***

The context is a meeting in a primary school with parents and staff to focus on helping to build home/school relationships and create more joined-up support around the children in school. This focus already positioned everyone in a particular way, and created a shift from less helpful perspectives and relationships that had been previously quite fraught between parents and school staff. A set of collaborative meetings led to agreement on the focus of the work; to build relationships through creative activities, reflecting circles creating together and being shaped by significant themes and issues that came up for the group. This involved the parents and staff working with each other, having the children as a central focus, and running larger family and school events together through a collaborative process that brought parents and school staff closer together.

The parent and staff group agreed to explore hopes and dreams in a session that I was to join and facilitate with a view to constructing preferred narratives and pictures of relationships between home and school. Everyone anticipated and I had prepared to facilitate future ‘dreaming conversations’ (Lang and McAdam, 1997, p.8) building on aspects that people most appreciated and what they dreamed of building in terms of existing strengths, capacities and relationships. This I hoped would position everyone in ‘an emergent language game’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.197) as more involved, liberating and transparent, and thus offer more open ways to go on together in dialogue. This was an invitation to move towards a distinctly different vantage point and away from more constraining and closed positions in conversations.

### **Biases in my Practice Position in this Conversation**

Awareness of my biases in systemic practices positions that are inclined towards joint activity and ‘open dialogue’ (Seikkula and Arnkil, 2006) is brought into view. I consider this practice position offers ways of joining with people and celebrating different experiences and viewpoints (Andersen, 1990; Cooperrider, 1990; Andersen, 1992; Andersen, 1996; Lang and McAdam, 1997).

## **Connections Stemming from the Smell of Pipe Smoke**

As I was entering the school building to meet parents and staff, I was struck by the smell of tobacco from a pipe as I caught wafts of passing smoke. I had been familiar with that smell as a nine-year-old child during a period when my father smoked a pipe. As I walked through the school towards the hall I was still distracted in the moment by the sweet aroma that seemed to linger apparently unnoticed by others, and I thought how unusual it is to see pipe-smoking now. A memory instantly followed of me, as a child, watching my father as he prepared the tobacco and his look of satisfaction, the way he relaxed as he drew in with a deep breath and then slowly and deliberately exhaled. The fragrance in the school building all those years later, became stronger and sweeter and the light vanilla aroma took me momentarily to a place of such warm thoughts of my father contemplating as he puffed away. The effect was calming. It seemed to attune me to other embodied senses, the sights, sounds and smells, as I walked through the hall. I was also aware of a slight nervousness, adrenalin and anticipation as I was entering with hopes for creating something positive and meaningful for the parents and staff as we were continuing an ongoing dialogue from the last time we met. I momentarily wondered about the different senses each person came with and how that informed them entering our conversation. I was wondering what might be taken for granted, what had gone unnoticed before and what could be opened up now as this had ignited all sorts of momentary reflections and heightened my awareness for me on this occasion.

When we met and began to explore hopes, visions and dreams as a school community, I picked up a heavy tempo and feel in the room, and flat responses following my questions and exploration in this area. It prompted me to rethink my position in terms of how we were going on. I asked a few more questions hoping and inviting people to join and quickly turned to a self-reflexive question about my own position and my need to reposition to join with others. It felt like this called for me to do something quite different. I asked the question: ‘How is this going for people?’ The shrugs of the shoulders told me there was not really a connection even though everyone had agreed and anticipated coming to a dream-building session. I was curious about how a position I find hugely resourceful and valuable most of the time and in many contexts was not fitting with people in this situation, and the non-verbal clues around the room communicated this lack of fit. I invited some feedback at this point and offered plainer questions:

‘I am wondering how this fits right now for people? How would everyone like to go on in our conversation together?’

This disconnect challenged some of my assumptions that this type of exercise would fit for all, given that it is inclusive and generative of resources people bring and, furthermore, it has been so well received and responded to in other contexts with different individuals and groups. In climbing terms I was wondering whether I was making a move too far outside the reach of others at this stage. Was I being over-enthusiastic, like a climber saying ‘How about this move?’ when my climbing companions were not inclined or not ready to join a particular part of a route and still getting to know each other’s style of climbing, differences and what feels comfortable and safe? In that moment, quite spontaneously and intuitively, I changed direction in my position as I asked permission to open the floor so to speak, for a moment. I asked a question about what parents and staff notice as they walk in the school building.

Helen: ‘What connections and stories do we all bring with us as we enter the school space? How does that inform our relationships with school now?’

I was not quite sure what I was going to say next but an invitation of a different kind to draw out different contexts, connections, memories perhaps of being a child at school, relationships with school staff and peers, and also what other relationships inform our current relationships. Everyone would have something to contribute I imagined.

The instant response to this was a look of interest as Paulette the learning mentor responded ‘That sounds interesting’. What felt like a risk-taking moment followed for me as I went on to ask permission to share some of my curiosities and the connections that arose for me in walking through the school today, including personal experiences and the informing contexts of class, education, culture, and religion.

Helen: ‘I was struck by a smell of pipe tobacco as I was just about to enter the school. As I walked through the school it opened up for me all sorts of connections. Is it ok to share some of the curiosities that struck me momentarily?’

The response was quite striking, with nods and eye contact, everyone looking more engaged, interested and curious. I did not go into huge detail. I shared how the connection through the smell of pipe smoke to my father opened up a new awareness to all my senses as I walked into the school. I described how I seemed to notice more the brightly coloured children’s paintings that wrapped the dull undertone of the brick walls in a burst of erupting, vibrant life, the sounds of children’s laughter and movement and the recollection from my own childhood of waiting in a queue to be given bottled milk and the wafts of

cooking smells from the school kitchen. I asked ‘What images of ourselves and others do we bring with us to this school space I wonder?’

There was an instant take up to this invitation as Aby, Maha and Jasmine were bubbling with connections that this ignited for them. This marked a clear turning point in the conversation and illustrated to me that taking a very different position, even though it felt more personally risky, was indeed a more responsive and relational move.

This was an invitation to enter an inquiring space together, and my position took on the form of a gentle guiding through the conversational space as I joined with the connections and placed us all in positions as inquirers with each other others in dialogue.

Paulette and Aby began to share their senses.

Paulette: ‘The smell of baking first thing in the morning is a comforting one that has stayed with me; the picture of me skipping into school first thing.’

Aby: ‘The smell of school milk comes back to me as a child too waiting in line with other children ... those silver and red bottle tops.’

Other parents enthusiastically joined in with the sharing of senses that were ignited and a different sense of noticing was generated as the different connections picked up momentum. The different senses breathed a life into the conversation, the smells, sights and sounds. There was a buzz in the room and laughter. These recollections seemed to invite a playfulness of childhood also.

Helen: ‘And what about the relationships and the voices and influences of others who are or have been significant in our lives?’

Again here it felt appropriate to model a position of sharing safely a personal connection.

Helen: ‘I am connecting for example to my father who’s no longer around, and the importance he placed on education even though he did not have the same opportunities in his childhood.’

This question, and its more personal position, opened this relational space further and I connected very closely to the parents as they connected and built on this..

Paulette: 'I carry many stories with me and memories of loved ones ... my grandmother who looked after me, she loved making things for us. She made sure we got to school, education was so important to her. She's no longer alive but I still can conjure up a real sense of her and that smell brings her close.'

The energy changed in the room as the other women present were nodding and chatting in acknowledgement and familiarity.

As Paulette talked about the importance of education to her grandmother I was connecting further on the importance my father placed on schooling for me and my brothers and felt a sense of sadness that he worked hard all his life and never really got to see us complete our education.

I was quickly drawn back to being present by the energy in the room. The attention to other parents present and to the senses that were ignited on entering the school seemed to be a joining point for everyone to contribute and meet up, as different parents added their observations and connections to different senses – smells, sights and sounds – and there was a buzz in the room as those connections were made and people responded with laughter. The recollections seemed to invite a playfulness of childhood. Jeanie, a parent, said that 'The sharing opened up a connection and meaning of what just being in school represented for me.'

Inquiring into the space we were in together now prompted me to ask a question.

Helen: 'How is this going?'

I was aware that I had set us on this track of talking, although everyone seemed to be engaged.

Helen: 'Is it ok to continue together in this conversation, what's your sense? How are we in our relationship with each other in this conversation?'

The immediate feedback confirmed that it was 'fine to go on', with nods around the room.

Adding 'sense' to the question seemed to stretch it a little further as I made eye contact with every woman in the room. I felt the connection in an embodied way, and the engagement.

Paulette: 'I am sensing how hard it must have been for our parents then and working all the time meant they were less involved in our school life as kids but they meant well.'

Jasmine: 'I really connect with that, it was hard, my parents never dared challenge authority. There was a fear of authority and seeing the red shiny brick on the wall in school sometimes reminds me of that, puts me back there.'

We reflected on the journeys and stories that we all came with about education and knowledge of different kinds: 'It was about how to bring food to the table', Maha said. 'My grandparents worked the land; this was the education that they needed to put the food on the table.' Openings seemed to be created for different connections to come to light; a movement to another place guided the parents to a different space of curiosity ignited through the senses, with different experiences of school, relationships to education, childhood, family, generational stories about relationships to learning and education in general. Arij, whose family were from Somalia and had described herself as 'shy' in speaking to teachers, talked very personally about her experience: 'There was a lot going on in my country. My parents, family and friends and whole community were affected by the war. I was very young but still had a sense of school being a haven for me when everything was sliding away.' This was a powerful metaphor that seemed to give a lived sense of a human story of separation and loss that comes from war. It struck a chord (Mead, 1934). She went on: 'I want to take the haven that school can provide for my child. The difference is that I can be part of that as a mother. I can see that I can be more involved, I really want to be.'

There was a quality of listening and appreciation of survival and resilience as Arij's hopes were being shaped in the talk and as she connected this to her direct experience. Mapping out the different knowledges in the room became a celebration of what we had shared from our lived experiences. It became a 'we' space of practice and inquiry. We were exploring from a position of being with and alongside each other (Shotter, 2010; Andersen, 1996), just as climbers negotiating a route together on a rock face need to remain open and attuned and responsive. One climber cannot carry on without her fellow climbers and there is negotiation and coordination in their movement together. There was a sense of working alongside others in this conversation.

As parents talked I introduced the lens of the GRAAACCEES through which to explore this further, and reflected on how views about education have changed, about gendered stories about higher expectation on boys and the multiple challenges and contexts our families lived within and how the different voices held in current hopes. Some talked about the punitive system of education they experienced, ‘when teachers were allowed to hit children’.

I inwardly connected this to my personal experience of education and authority figures who had a punitive style and approach to education that was a blaming, judgemental and punishing one. Counter to this was the encouragement and support from my father especially and the importance he placed on our learning. His words – ‘never take it for granted’ and ‘look for the learning in every situation’ – still resonate with me now. In this conversation there was something that the talk and sharing together was bringing to life of what we already know and what Wittgenstein (1953, p.89) would call reminders. Whilst I felt my father very close to me at this point I chose not to share this personal connection. It did, however, inform my next question:

Helen: ‘What are the influences, stories, people, voices that we would like to draw on more as we build our relationships within this school community?’ [Pause]

This was a long pause that seemed to be a thinking, reflective pause. In the space I tried to construct a clearer question.

Helen: ‘How do we take the ones that are more helpful and let go of those that are least helpful to create the best possible relationships we can imagine?’

This was the opening to a new conversation that was to develop and continue over our following meetings together as each parent contributed to a picture bigger together.

### **A Reflecting Conversation about our Conversation**

I invited the parents and staff to join a reflective circle a few days later about our talking experience and how and where that moved us to. This was extending the inquiry space together, and all those involved attended this conversation. A comment that particularly resonated was: ‘You became a real person when you shared your experience. It made it ok to talk about the differences and similarities of our

experiences.’ Particular reflections from the group pertained to the dream questions and how they did not fit. Maha talked about her experience of a child growing up in the Sudan and poignantly commented ‘When you are surviving you don’t have the space for dreams, it is too painful. It feels sometimes like being so far away from achieving a better life for all your loved ones and this question is difficult when you feel like this.’

This was followed by Aby saying ‘I cannot dream for myself or family here knowing other members in my family are suffering.’

Janice: ‘I have been thinking about the dream since we last met and how I carry with me many generations of dreams; it is not individual but a collective one. There are a thousand people, families and communities attached to my dreams. I feel more open to this now and take this further as I work through what’s important for me and the children.’

As Janice and Arij spoke I was excited about the concept of a massive collective dream that others could join and that would continuously grow and take shape. I was struck by the importance of the validation and I shared too the new thoughts it kindled for me. The dynamism of the process in conversation in any one moment held complexity and paradoxes of cultures within cultures, old stories informing present stories, and feeding forward (Lang and McAdam, 1997) to form futures. Different positions shifted as perceptions, clarity and areas that had remained hidden were fore-grounded and enhanced an awareness and sensitivity to each other and collectively.

## **Summary and where this Points**

My orientation towards inquiry within practice, and indeed my choices in the practice settings I have worked in, comes from a very distinct pull of working with and alongside people and is informed by both personal and professional multiple contexts. Some of the larger organisations, such as health and social care services, are less confining and more egalitarian at the outset, and inquiring from within everyday community settings fits with my hope to make systemic practice more extensive in its outreach and more inclusive. This is an important backdrop informing my ongoing inquiry. Looking back in this way creates a context for a philosophical orientation which I take my inquiry into in the next chapter.



The case illustration sheds new light from within my experience of what it means as an embodied sensate practitioner. This awareness and attention to what is happening in these embodied moments with sensitivity to the relational space becomes a huge resource in our systemic positioning in conversations with others. A space of inquiry opens up also within the process of conversation about how we go on together that is process-led. This vignette is significant as it sparked in me a huge swell of curiosity or ‘eruption’, as Docherty (1996, p.198) puts it. This was something I could not account for in my ‘prior forms and rules of thinking’ (Docherty, 1996) positioning me as a sensate being in practice and in dialogue with others. Questions this experience generates for me include:

- What happens to me in the talk and how am I positioned in the moment?
- How do I reposition and draw reflexively to respond to the responses of others?
- How do I adopt resourceful positions from these sensate moments?

In the next chapter I move from the notion of a method to a more fitting orientation with the emergent nature of systemic practice, one that takes into account complexity and multiplicity. Inquiry is seen within a philosophical orientation that enables me to examine the reflexive space of embodied and relational practices. My questioning of the language of the academy of method and methodological tools is apparent in the next chapter.

‘The language of the academy and all that it symbolised fell short in its ability to capture and communicate the complexity of human experience’ (Knowles and Cole, 2008, p.57).

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **STEPPING OFF THE LEDGE: A PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION TO INQUIRY**

‘Research is always “with philosophy”’

(Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p.6, quoted in McNamee and Hosking, 2012)

#### **Introduction**

This quotation sets the orientation that I am taking to inquiry throughout this work, and in this chapter specifically as I build on the application of the systemic tools, ideological and theoretical influences on inquiry discussed in the previous chapter. Systemic practice focuses on relational processes and the ways these processes construct various forms of life. Reflexive inquiry therefore is part of something I do in my everyday practice, and I use the term ‘inquiry’ throughout as it ‘seems to imply an orientation toward exploration and opening up to the senses along with a curiosity and openness to what might be’ (McNamee and Hosking, 2012). It acknowledges this aspect of daily practice and, in this case, conversations with my conversational partners in a process of self- and relational reflexivity as we find ways of going on. As McNamee and Hosking suggest, the term ‘inquiry’ is broadly used to include practices and interests that certain communities would call ‘research’, and it describes my orientation in the way I conduct inquiry.

The concepts, and theoretical and philosophical biases highlighted in this chapter therefore are distinctly different to a ‘received view of science’. My orientation here is not detached and controlled for the production of relatively objective knowledge. It is open, uncertain, unfixed and evolving. I am borrowing from the community of post-positivist qualitative research with a social and relational constructionist sensibility that offers a particular lens that sees research as a process of inquiry. Within this ‘language game’ (Wittgenstein, 1953), as one among many, the language of method is not used and research methods are not set forth as such.

Much of social life escapes our capacity to make models of it, not only in the technical sense that it is beyond the grasp of current research methods, but in the more profound sense that it is constitutively resistant to the process of being gathered together into a single account, description or method (Law and Urry, 2003, p.5).

## **Relational Embodied, Reflexive Inquiry: A Way of Going on**

Resources that help orientate me towards inquiry include systemic tools of self- and relational reflexivity which are central to this self-scrutiny process where I become the case study. I explore an embodied metaphor, highlight relationships as creative and active, and counter the conception of human relationships as mechanical. I recognise my biases within this type of inquiry, using a particular focus on embodied relational reflexivity, exploring the relational interaction with its embodied and dialogical (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984; 1986) features. It is an area of life that I have found difficult to describe adequately, and yet it is experienced in an intense way. Inquiry that enters relational interactions that are dynamic, fluid, complex and open-ended has led me to explore a wide range of research communities which have influenced this inquiry. I explore these influences, and the way I am orientating as inquirer and practitioner, through the model Approach-Method-Technique (AMT) (Burnham, 1992). Influences that move towards a relational, dialogical, embodied, social constructionist systemic orientation to practice and inquiry have retrospectively guided me in the orientation I have taken to practice and inquiry. I retrospectively propose in this thesis what I term relational embodied reflexive inquiry.

## **The Climb**

I see this part of the process as similar to the point on a climb when I pause before stepping off a ledge. This seems to fit as I am proposing and attempting to do something different; a route not taken. Different influences, factors and resources are drawn on that are familiar to me in the act of climbing, moves that I have practised and have become part of the way I move alongside others in the process. However there are also times as climbers that we have to find different unique and novel ways to go on, attending and adapting to the features, types of rock, changing environment that we come to know as fellow climbers together. At this stage perhaps I am taking a lead position as I step off the ledge to set up this route, but this is with the influential experience of a particular climbing community. In this inquiry, that is post-positivist qualitative research, boundaries are more nuanced. Stepping off this ledge is a move into a more

uncertain, unpredictable and exploratory domain, and a philosophical orientation provides a way though research (inquiry). Novel and unexpected happenings in both inquiry practice and climbing are features that transgress each activity. A disposition therefore that is flexible and poised to respond and adapt to the multiple and complex happenings and multiplicity of features that unfold become valuable to inquiry within practice, to systemic practice, and to the act of climbing alike.

### **Approach–Method–Technique**

John Burnham's Approach–Method-Technique (AMT) (1992) is a framework I have appreciated and found useful both in my practice and supervision, in demonstrating ways of developing accounts of different practices by exploring different influencing contexts. It also borrows from Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (Cronen and Pearce, 1985; Pearce, 1989) and is discussed more fully through this chapter. I find the AMT framework useful in allowing ways of developing a coherent account from a position of inquiry.

As an inquirer inquiring from within practice I am moving between these different levels of context and these have a significant shaping influence on which ideas predominate. This includes the personal and professional influences (discussed in the last chapter) and theoretical descriptions of social activities that I acknowledge as part of broader cultural narratives and which inform me in my choices within this inquiry. My approach includes the ideological and theoretical propositions and, I would add here, the meta-theoretical assumptions.

#### **Under Approach I explore:**

- Philosophical orientation
- Social constructionism
- A relational constructionist influence
- Systemic theory
- Post-positivism
- Post-qualitative research

Methods and techniques as proposed by Burnham (1992) have been separated out and this has been helpful in the contexts of practice and supervision. Within this framework, separating method and

technique provides a focus on identifiable systemic practice (and in this case inquiry) activities such as questions (Penn, 1985; Tomm, 1987; McCarthy and Byrne, 1988; Burnham 1992; Burnham, 1993; Burnham, 1995; White, 1988) by paying attention to language, multiple positioning, and ways of talking. This has helped open opportunities to generate a dialogue in which to reflect on our activities as systemic practitioners. A post-positivist qualitative influence moves me, however, to take a vantage point that opens a view beyond method whilst allowing an appreciation of how useful it remains for me as a systemic practitioner. For the purpose of orientating the reader I merge method and technique together.

### **Under Method and Technique I explore:**

- Systemic inquiry tools
- Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), a framework for self reflexivity
- Ethnography, autoethnography and relational ethnography
- Writing as a form of inquiry
- Embodied knowing
- Embodied writing as a method of inquiry
- Ethics – an ongoing process
- Dialogue as relational and embodied
- The use of metaphor in inquiry

### **Approach**

#### **A philosophical orientation**

A philosophical orientation that recognises that research is always ‘with philosophy’ (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p.6, in McNamee and Hosking, 2012) offers a distinctly different view to the modernist position of many research communities who seek to inquire into the world rather than seeing knowledge as a contextually dependant matter with no ‘theory-neutral data’ (Johnson, 1987). A philosophical orientation that offers this shift is strongly influenced from a social constructionist perspective; particularly those whose focus on relational processes (Gergen 2009). This widely divergent field has included writers who

have framed the 'social' with the idea of the social world imprinting its powers of construction onto the individual whilst existing separately (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

'All research inquiry intervenes in the lives of those who participate as well as the lives of the researchers themselves' (McNamee and Hosking, 2012, p.xvi). As a practice-orientated reflective inquirer I see my practice as a legitimate form of inquiry whilst being aware of the huge biases and blind spots for one participant among many other participants in 'action(s)' together. This places an ethical responsibility on me to demonstrate my self- and relational reflexivity and how I am enacting 'reflections in' and 'reflections on' action(s) (Schon, 1987). Ethical questions involving issues of power and balance are considered at each juncture, and within this orientation I have attempted to place the focus on interdependence rather than independence (Gergen and Gergen, 2000, p.78) whereby knowledge becomes co-constructed between participants. This fits within the frame of social constructionism in which the relation between inquirer and those studied is taken as part of the process through which events being explored are jointly created: 'the researcher both constructs and is constructed by his or her interactions with the person in dialogue and vice versa' (Cronen and Pearce, 1985, p.145). I have considered therefore how I may have affected the narratives we constructed together.

### **Practice as a Form of Inquiry: Stepping into Uncertainty, Complexity and Openness, and Acknowledging my Biases**

Within this philosophical orientation of practice as inquiry there is a complete letting go of ideas of objectified forms of knowledge, which leaves space to appreciate different types of knowledge. This is a distinct movement off an objectified ledge and a no-ledge of this kind generates different kinds of knowledges to be illuminated and more fitting ways to enter the practice experience. Explored here is just one embodied and relationally reflexive inquiry. Within systemic inquiry there is an ethical coherence in acknowledging the biases through the consistent practice of reflexive positioning. Therefore being located as an inquirer within the particularities of my experience, I am drawing on reflexivity and ethics as I step off a ledge. This act of stepping off a ledge, therefore, as an inquirer practitioner requires a letting go of order, finalised concepts, definitions and method-driven approaches (Ellingson, 2009) and reaching out into life as it is lived in its complexity.

It is with this systemic reflexive poise that I become open to the unique learning that emerges from each episode and moment of conversation, letting go of the notion that there is a scientifically sound method.

Systemic practices and inquiry ideas offer a rich and varied repertoire to help orientate the movement from what has been a very safe ledge to momentarily having no ledge. It is a process of uncertainty, complexity, and emergence. Complexity, or what Shotter (2004) termed ‘chiasmatic realities’, counters reductionism; the whole is not reduced to parts.

It is their lack of any predetermined order and thus their openness to being specified or determined by those involved in them, in practice ... that is both their defining feature that opens them up to the efforts of those acting within them (75)

Being positioned as my own case study within this orientation allows for an exploration of the different challenges and biases of inquiring from within practice. Postmodern and post-structuralist writers have suggested that we cannot separate out what we do from what we ‘find’ (Leppington, 1991; Gergen, 2008). I am mindful therefore of what I do, how I do this inquiry process, and my influence from being in practice and inquiry, on what I seem to find. This writing is personal, with clear biases; for example, inviting the additional and different lens of the climbing metaphor as a potential relational embodied reflexive inquiry is clearly significant. No ‘finding’ emerges outside of some sort of cultural, social and political contexts and therefore we are constantly reflexively constructing a way of going on together in the moment.

## **Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism as meta-theory has informed this philosophical orientation with its focus on language activities, and the stories we generate in our conversations can enhance or hinder meaningful connections and therefore shape our realities. Social constructionism acknowledges that we live in a postmodern world with the many and varied versions of realities being generated in different discursive communities. In her earlier work McNamee (1994) raised significant questions about how research itself can bring forth the kind of world that accommodates multiple and competing versions of reality. She acknowledged that multiple ways of knowing the world, including the continually developing technical and global technology, prompted ethical questions to guide us in our daily lives. Gergen and Gergen (2000) suggest that the traditional goal of research should be discarded as an accumulation of products, of static frozen findings, and replaced by the ‘generation of communicative process’ (2000, p.1039). Systemically there are many ways to inquire into these communicative processes and all involve practice or action and interaction. Among the ways discussed in the last chapter were curiosity, systemic

questions, emergent stories, approaches to power and issues of social differences, forms of accounting including writing, and creating openings for reflective dialogue such as reflecting teams and attention to transparency, reflexivity, inner dialogue and outer responses. This perhaps fits more within a relational constructionist approach (McNamee and Hosking, 2012) that also draws on social constructionism as a meta-theory and is examined further in this chapter.

## **Qualitative Research Companions**

The field of qualitative inquiry is very broad and there is a degree of fit within this qualitative research field in terms of an endeavour ‘to understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through situations’ (Elliot et al., 1991). This does seem to fit with how I see the world, practise, and account for that practice from a qualitative research position that aims to ‘contribute to a process of revision and enrichment of understanding’ (Elliot et al., 1991). Attention to a position indicated by ‘they’ appears to place the researcher as separate. I do not place too much emphasis on categorising researchers or various research orientations, however, but focus on those that are influencing me in this inquiry.

Among the influences from the qualitative research community that I have found helpful are Denzin and Lincoln (2005). They take a position that distinguishes theory of method as retrospectively constructed. This permits me to orientate in such a way as to amplify my relational embodied reflexive voice. I am interested in those inquirers whose work fits with ideas of ‘enrichment of understanding’ of the multiple complexities of daily experiences of conversations and those that ‘signal innovative approaches to sense-making and representation’ (Ellingson, 2009, p.7).

I have become increasingly aware of the professional language, jargon and biases that creep in and create a possible distance from what is occurring in the lived experience. I reflect on professionalisation and its implications for inquiry and informing factors through my experience of many years in different services of health, education and youth justice. Qualitative research that is inclined towards reflexive and relational processes (discussed more fully later in this chapter) helps me to be attentive to possible ‘professional indoctrination’ through working for large services that impose a dominant view and understanding, and to reflect on this as an influence on my account and my positioning in inquiry.



Considerations of this kind reflect a sense of stepping off the ledge, as assumptions and biases have come into view in this inquiry process and inquiry companions within the field of qualitative research have helped me question professional assumptions: ‘When we constantly realise our relations to the others with whom we are interdependent, the something of this experience cuts across the forces of dualism’ (Burkitt, 1999, p.20).

I have found ideas of merging boundaries and blurring of genres (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) very helpful. Suggested here is a refusal of strict boundaries between social research approaches, and Lather (1997) encourages a third space of both, suggesting letting practice and the theoretical reflexively influence each other. Considering a recursive relationship between practice and theory helps also navigate through dualism and elevates the significance of practice.

### **Post-Positivism: Countering the Pull**

It is important to acknowledge a position that I started from in inquiry as influenced from a post-positivist discourse of science. This holds that scientists construct knowledge by combining what is in the mind with what is in the world, therefore collapsing the dualist opposition of empiricism (knowledge reflecting pure observation) and rationalism (knowledge produced by a reasoning mind) from general axioms to hidden laws and structures. Knowledge can never be fully objective, therefore, and social and cultural factors are accepted as influencing knowledge. Post-positivist research communities subscribe to a blurred epistemology, accepting that it is not possible to know the world as it really is as we cannot have unmediated access to ‘the real world’. The ways individuals act in the world are acts of construction blurring what is known of reality. A critique of positivism however is that the pull of subject/object dualism remains a ‘regulatory ideal’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.110) as, in their knowing, scientists strive to be as separate as possible from the object(s) of their inquiry. This critique of post-positivist assumptions indeed applies also to social constructivist assumptions in that whilst they blur some primarily epistemological subject/object assumptions, they continue to subscribe to subject/object relations in the conduct of scientific inquiry. This centres on a challenge presented to professionals of how to ‘suspend certainty’ (McNamee and Hosking, 2012, p.89). It ties in with the assumptions I had about thinking there was a right way of doing, being and speaking in order to conduct inquiry, and that perhaps professionalisation could be seen as a by-product of modernist views of knowledge, of seeing with a ‘God’s eye view’ that still dominates professional systems. In embarking upon this inquiry, fired by a belief that stories, experiences and the knowledge that people bring to conversations are diverse, rich

and multiple, I hope to do something different in inquiry by creating collaborative relational spaces. I aim for creativity for sharing some of the richness of these experiences. I hope also to illuminate the different range of multiple knowledges that usually become so hidden, to enable a deepening of understanding for new possibilities to emerge. This is what everyday systemic practice for me is all about. The influences of professional organisations in their structures, systems, language and general ethos can broadly be described as authoritative rather than collaborative, so this inquiry is an attempt not only to ‘suspend certainty’ (McNamee and Hosking, 2012) but to embrace uncertainty; systemic reflexive inquiry offers a way to counter the post-positivist pull.

### **Relational Constructionist Influence**

A way through this ‘radically relational’ orientation to the world within a relational constructionist lens is proposed by McNamee and Hosking (2012), who take on the question of method from the position that ‘there is no such thing as a relational constructionist method’. They see ‘inquiry as engaged unfolding’ (McNamee and Hosking, 2012, p.43). Within this orientation all activities in which all humans participate, including theorising as well as practical inquiry, are relational processes. This has implications for multiple systems of practice, research and inquiry generating different and novel ways of doing inquiry whilst acknowledging the multiple ways of philosophising, seeing, sensing, and acting in the world. This also fits with my experience of the inquiry endeavour as an ‘engaged unfolding’ (McNamee and Hosking, 2012). The position this enables is one of working alongside others in full collaboration with all involved towards finding new ways of going on (Wittgenstein, 1953). It does not substantially differ from a therapeutic conversation or consultation I have with a group of professionals or non-professionals, or in the conversations I am involved in within community capacities. All conversations occur within a context, and the contexts and sets of interests may differ depending on the different informing factors and individuals within conversations. I see this endeavour as being about maximising the potential for reflexive conversations within the space, and I draw on it in relation to embodiment within the relational embodied reflexive space (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984; 1986). My experience with Joe (Chapter 1) was that he moved from an urgency to do – which may have been a pre-rehearsed script for Joe, as others saw him as a doer, to a position of being in our conversation. There seemed to be an evolving reflection in the silent but active space of listening. The idea of dialogue as ‘unique, once occurring events’ is brought into view in each conversation I am in, and my choice to follow this particular path of inquiry has emerged in my own community-based participations.

The later work of Wittgenstein (1953) and his influence regarding the relation of language (and of theory) to reality has also a part in this philosophical orientation, offering different vantage points connected to embodiment within relational realities in interaction. Language becomes performative and responsive, and leads me to ask as a systemic practitioner in this space how I can generate an appreciative space, facilitating strengths and qualities, and illuminating potential in people in conversations with individuals and groups. It also questions different taken-for-granted notions of knowledge.

## **Systemic Practice Theory**

### ***Reflecting Processes***

Many of the overlapping practices discussed in Chapter 3 are transferable to the process of inquiry, and I have drawn on all of those as valuable inquiry resources (see Systemic Practice and Inquiry table, Chapter 3). Inspiring my interest as an embodied systemic therapist, in particular, has been the work of Andersen (1992; 1993a; 1993b; 1995; 1996). His reflecting processes influence me directly in my everyday conversations. His talk about the experience of talking and his openness, humility and responsiveness, and the position he takes of learning from those he is in conversation with, is inspirational to me as a practitioner, inquirer and a person.

### **Reflexivity and Reflexive Relational Moments: How Do I Extend from Practice to Inquiry?**

Distinctions between self- and relational reflexivity (Burnham, 1992; 1993; 2005; Hedges, 2010) have been central in helping me reflect on my practice. A core question in inquiry is how reflexive practices transfer to research. In the area of qualitative inquiry there has been much focus on reflexivity in research of inquiry (Ellis, 2004; Etherington, 2004). I place a spotlight on what I describe as ‘reflexive moments’, and by reflexivity here I mean an awareness of the patterns of communication which we are all experiencing in a relational system and our part in these patterns. I am questioning my sensed embodied responses, my internal dialogue, the informing factors and contexts of my external moves in terms of what I do and say, how I am responding to others and the reciprocal response, and so on. In inviting others into inquiry about the process and experience of our talk, including the sharing of our noticing, becoming curious together and reflecting together on how to go on is a form of practice inquiry. However

I am curious that invitations to contribute outside of the conversations in different forms in the process were not taken up.

The notion of stepping off the ledge as a climber can also be likened to the reflexive moment, to the experience in each conversation in which I participate that, in our uncertainty, something about knowledge that we already possess is coming to light, something which in its telling moves us in a direction together through the current terrain of our humanness. Like climbers who are feeling a way through this process that existing knowledge is sufficient enough for us to gain a foothold or a handhold, a conceptual grasp of the whole. In movement this is without a firm vantage point from which to view it. This is experience from being in conversation. My stance in exploring moments is from a grasp which allows us to see all the different aspects of a person as if arrayed within a landscape, all in relation to one another, ‘from *all* the standpoints within it’ (Shotter, 1984).

I am drawn to the word ‘fragile’ (Ricoeur, 1972), which Oliver (1996) identifies as having an intrinsic relationship with responsibility. In this way, when fragility occurs we are obliged to position ourselves as nurturing or caring. I connect with and am drawn to this, and to the ideas of vulnerability discussed by hooks (1994) that refer to the student-tutor/supervisor relationship and the need for tutors to take risks and experience vulnerability whilst encouraging students to take risks. This is pertinent to the position within inquiry and practice also, which aims to be empowering to those involved. bell hooks suggested that empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable.

This is relevant to this practice across community settings as the majority of conversations in this inquiry were with women and young people of colour, some British-born but from different heritages, like myself, or with a range of preferred languages and religious orientations. hooks’ (1994; 2004) work generally offers a powerful, compassionate voice on a range of everyday concerns for people of colour who experience marginalisation and powerlessness in a system that discriminates on the basis of race, culture, gender, ability/disability, class and religion. Her work has helped me in considering my place alongside others with different experiences in the world, my practice and this inquiry, and what has become a personal reflexive process for me in the writing. While the talk about talking involves relational reflexivity, and invitations to reflect together about how we are interacting are transparent, open and relational, curiosity about a reluctance to join more in this inquiry leads me to question some of the barriers and be more rigorous about power relationships. This is discussed further in the final chapter.

## **Method and Technique**

The previous section might be considered as coming under the heading of methods and technique, as I moved into reflexive moments and thinking of how those systemic resources transfer with me from my practice into inquiry. Drawing on methods and techniques, tools of ‘systemic gear’ from systemic practice for inquiry, I build on the systemic resources referred to in the last chapter and acknowledge the ideological assumptions and theoretical biases. These resources include:

- Systemic inquiry tools
- Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) a framework for self reflexivity
- Ethnography, autoethnography and relational ethnography
- Writing as a form of inquiry
- Embodied knowing
- Embodied writing as a method of inquiry
- Ethics – an ongoing process
- Dialogue as relational and embodied
- The use of metaphor in inquiry

## **Systemic Inquiry Tools**

### **Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM): A Framework for Self-Reflexivity**

CMM has provided a useful lens through which to consider these multiple contexts, and I frequently employ it as a model in practice. Pearce (1999) talks about ‘reflexive self-awareness’ and what is being made in the process of social interaction. This has proved useful in remaining vigilant about questions that include being curious about what is happening in relation to my own stories and how these may influence me in my responses to others in this moment.

CMM pays particular attention to the construction of narratives of purpose, obligation and legitimation as dimensions of meaning. Episodes of communication, identities, relational and cultural rules and patterns are constituted in language and as contextual sites for meaning (Cronen and Pearce, 1985).

Contexts can consist of descriptions about culture, gender, identity, relationship and episode. Episodes are made through participants using devices to enact scripts within their discourse position, attempting to achieve their goals, and through engaging in evoking and responding to others in the process of a particular interaction. There is a relationship between an event or episode and the context; just as the context informs the meaning of the event (exerting a contextual force), so the event can inform the meaning of the context (implicative force). These contextual levels can be seen as existing in a temporary hierarchy at any given time, yet can change during the course of an episode or relational exchange. I have found the Atomic Model (Pearce, 1994) illustrates the dynamic character of these contexts and offers a useful way of exploring the interwoven moral narratives and the recursive influence they have on each other. I use this model as a snapshot of the different conversations I am in, and also to highlight some of my internal dialogue in Chapters 6 and 7.

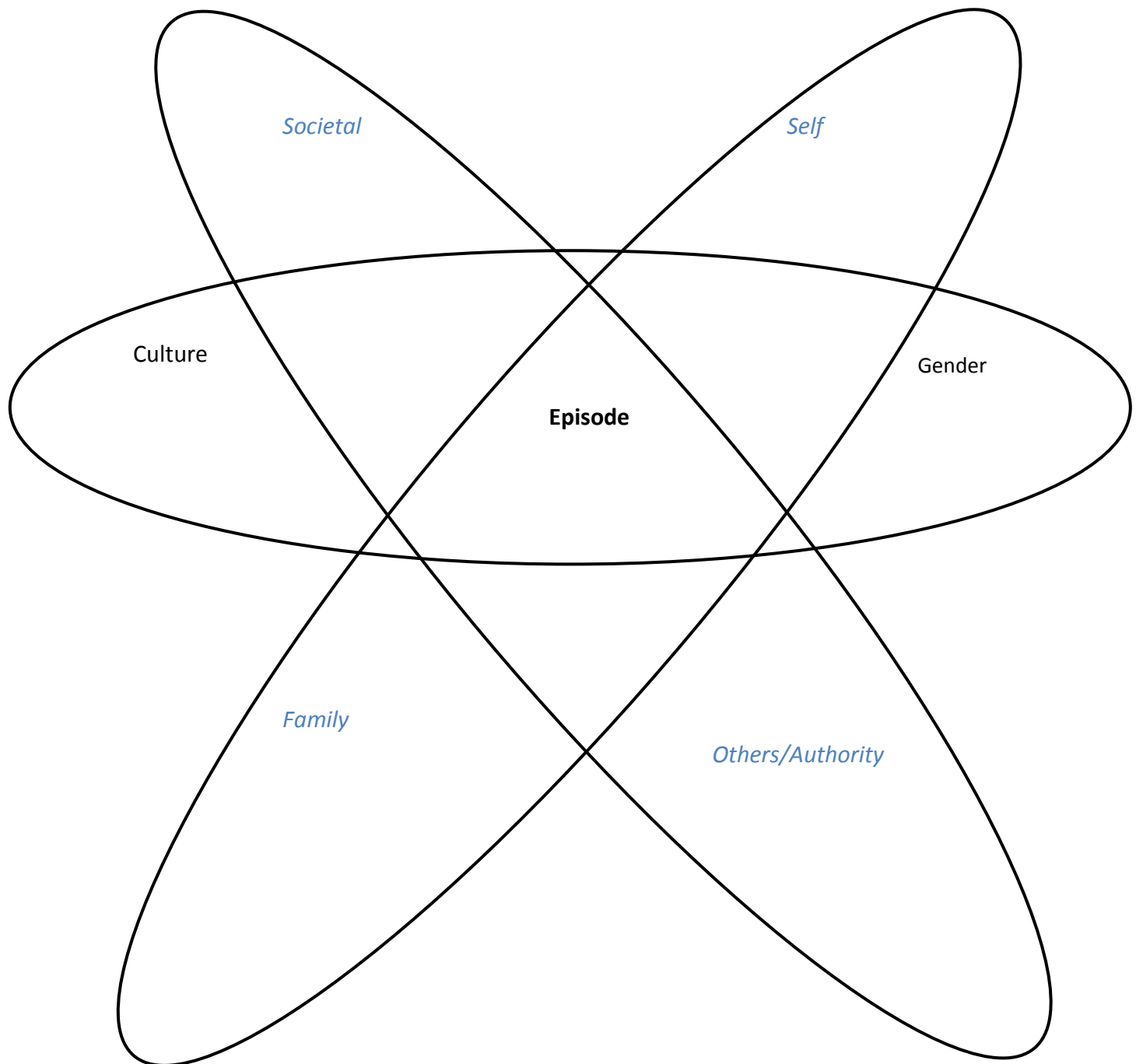
Contextually this opens reflections on the many different contexts and episodes people act into, speak into, and act out of. In my conversation with Lorna in the next chapter, for example, there was a societal context that many parents (particularly mothers) feel they are labelled as 'poor parents'. Young people are also labelled, within systems, as 'young offenders'. Embedded in the language these labels become accepted as a dominant narrative.

This has been of interest when considering the different positions being occupied at any one time, and in the interactive relational dynamic process. These contextual levels can be seen as existing in a temporary hierarchy at any given time, yet they can change during the course of an episode or relational exchange. I have found Pearce's Atomic Model (see Fig. 2) illustrates the dynamic character of these contexts well and is a useful way of exploring the interwoven moral narratives and the recursive influence they have on each other. I use this model as a useful snapshot in sequencing moves; the neighbourhood conversations. Within the frame of CMM we are encouraged and challenged, as systemic practitioners, to develop our consciousness of the moral logics informing our actions with reference to these sites for meaning and those that are constructed by them. It is not used as the main method of inquiry, however, but to demonstrate different stages and how that moves sequentially as a broader overview.

I am interested in how these contexts also inform our embodied responses and how they are enacted in our sense of having ‘a gut feeling’ about something. How are we making sense of these moments of being attuned to certain senses? What are they telling us and how do we remain open when experiencing them? I touched on this contextualisation in the conversations with Joe, Shaneela, Fatimah and the parents in the primary school earlier. I explore this more in the following chapters.

**Figure: 2**

**The Atomic Model**





## **Ethnography, Autoethnography and Relational Ethnography**

Drawing on the concept of ethnography and sensitivity to ‘researcher’ roles, influences and positioning within those roles (including interpreting data), whilst perceiving people as part of communities, fits with systemic practices in many ways, illuminating the richness and complexity of people’s lives. Going into the detail of the complexity achieves what Geertz, the anthropologist, described as ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 2000). In order to see this complexity, different positions, multiple values, opposing perceptions and different ways of being (identities) in different contexts are required. This has helped me conceptualise some of my movements and encounters. Research becomes a form of human relationship and requires accountability from the researcher within the encounters she is enacting. From this position the inquirer acknowledges that no account is comprehensive and that in the writing, space must always be ensured for the added voice of the reader Gergen (2009).

In autoethnography the researcher becomes her own case study and her own subject of research. The work of autoethnographers has been hugely significant in terms of being open, reflexive and putting myself in the picture (Ellis, 2004). This entails taking risks as an inquirer and of being in the action with others. This connects to climbing with other people: everyone is part of the interactive movement, and as one is making a move of one kind there are responsive moves from the others, and this constant moving and responding enables climbers to go on together. As the sole author of this piece I regard this as one of my dilemmas. I am hoping that a relational embodied reflexive position within this inquiry ‘through the use of reflexivity [and] subjectivity in research can be transformed from a problem to an opportunity’ (Finlay, 2002).

Staying within this field, the idea of an ‘embodied researcher’ (Etherington, 2004) was wholly appropriate for this research as I was using the climbing metaphor and as I explored different ways of extending and reflecting on different features and contours of embodied reflexivity. Etherington (2004) views her body and its responses, both in her personal and professional life, as significant. Finding my voice in this account therefore is something I reflect on more in the discussion. This idea of intimacy and of the inquirer as a person fitted so well with me, for example in my noticing, when outside of conversations – noticing thoughts and reflections that came to me as I was running, walking, listening to music, or painting, say, and which connected to previous conversations and became part of my doctoral diary.

## Writing as a Form of Inquiry

I am presenting writing from within experiences in the hope that it will create ‘understanding which consists in seeing connections’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.122). Katz and Shotter (1998) suggest a kind of writing that works – through the use of concrete details, the quoting of actually voiced utterances, the use of metaphors, making comparisons and juxtaposing (1998, p.30). Part of the process of inquiry has been through the act of writing and reflecting, and attending to the way I am presenting this text has been one that I hope reflects the multi-layered complexity. I am inspired by the comment ‘writing can be a form of inquiry’ (Etherington, 2004) as well as a performative act: ‘data would return to its place of importance as a resource for explorations of multiple understanding and keys for further engagement by wider communities beyond academia ...’ (Gergen and Jones, 2008, p.6).

I have been drawn to writing that can ‘allow expressions of desire, emotion and bodily sensations’ (Gergen, 2009, p.226). Gergen acknowledges that writing outside the conventional practices of writing runs the risk of being considered ‘a second-rate mind (2009, p.222). Connecting this to my metaphor of safe ledges for a climber, I am clearly moving off the ledge of conventional writing and stepping into what may be considered by a certain community riskier spaces in relation to conventional styles and approaches to inquiry. I want to privilege embodied writing as a creative process, highlighting my reflections and choices. I explore the use of a particular embodiment of the climb metaphor in the next chapter with a conversation with Lorna, a parent.

## Embodied Knowing

I find the term ‘knowing’ a more useful one than ‘knowledge’ as it implies a process that is ongoing and open. Perhaps any process of learning concerns gaining knowledge, knowing what to do and how to do it. Polanyi’s (1966) term ‘tacit knowledge’ and Stern’s (2004) ‘implicit knowing’ are similar. Within a wide range of therapeutic and systemic encounters with colleagues, clients, people in communities, supervisors, groups and individuals, there is ongoing learning. The position I take, therefore, in relation to learning and knowledge production acknowledges responsibility and involves choice and what informs our choices. Shotter, 2010; 2011), coined the phrase *with-ness* and suggested principles of transparency and *with-nessing* as being guiding ones in practice inquiry. I am reminded of my conversations with Joe in Chapter 1 and with Fatimah in Chapter 2 and the learning that came from these encounters and from the effect of being with others. We were all in a process wherein our being together, embodied and engaged, our

witnessing and listening became a *with-ness* also, and, further, what could be referred to as an embodied knowing. It is a question of knowing how to respond in the uncertainty and yet still find a way of going together in this uncertainty. The idea of meaning as embodied and socially constructed in dialogues has remained something of a blind spot for the constructionist model with its main focus on the spoken word: it fails to address the embodied nature of discourse itself and that talk is inherently embodied' (Shaw 2003). Merleau-Ponty (1964) referred to the experiencing self with the bodily organism. In her description of 'bracing myself' Lorna, the parent I am in conversation with in Chapter 6, was describing her bodily knowing of holding back at times when she clearly wanted to say something but thought that doing so would be less helpful to her son. This case vignette illustrates how my inner dialogue was responding to my own embodied sense (a knowing) that it was more important to remain poised within a longer pause. I connect this bodily knowing with what Schon (1987) referred to as 'knowing more than we can say'.

Embodied knowing and going on together in inquiry include considerations of 'the notion of people collectively constructing environments in which to act in the world' (Holzman, 2009, p.26). Holzman drew on the work of Vygotsky and his theories of learning as social. She saw his theory not as a theory of mind but as a theory of becoming, and the conception of human development as the activity of becoming. Vygotsky (1986) questioned views of doing science, recognising that human beings do, and need to continue to do, more than use existing tools, make new instrumental tools and acquire knowledge. Humans reshape the very environments that determine them, performing who they are becoming, creating culture and transforming the world.

## **Embodied Writing as a Method of Inquiry**

Writing from within this inquiry, I have come to reflect on embodied writing as a form of inquiry inspired by Etherington (2004), Richardson (1990; 2000) and Simon (2011).

I come into view for the reader. Etherington writes that 'Without sight of the person at the heart of the work I feel no particular relationship with the writer' (2004, p. 25). Simon treats inner dialogue 'as an exchange of views which are attached to voices with their own (monological) or fluidly responsive (dialogical) character and a series of relational responses between voices influenced by the context they are acting into and out of' (2004, p.67). This connects for me in terms of embodied presentations of tone

of voice, the sense of discomfort, or passion, humour, confusion and the like that all make up the embodied relational fabric of our lives.

### **Ethics: An Ongoing Process**

I consider ethics to be interwoven into the fabric of each of the features throughout inquiry. I see this as the rope connecting and ensuring the safety of every climber, and it is therefore never forgotten, nor is it ever taken for granted. Careful attention is paid always to the particulars of moment-by-moment interaction. This is central in systemic practice and implicit in a range of different systemic ways of working, and I list just a few of many here. In *Appreciative Inquiry* Cooperrider and Whitney (1999) recognise and amplify those things that enhance and energise life and learning from abilities, assets and potentials. Lang and McAdam (2000) provided practices and methods which enhance possibilities for people and provide a basis for moral and ethical practice in varied areas. This has many dimensions, which grow from the formative, creative power of language. Language is seen as creating and doing and is an aesthetic issue as ‘we become morally responsible for the way we describe people and how we relate to them to create possibilities to live fruitful futures’. Looking for the novel is also something I draw on as an ethical focus, seeking ‘unique outcomes’ (White and Epston, 1990) and contradictions (Bateson, 1972; Cecchin et al., 1993; Oliver 1992; 1996; Pearce, 1989).

‘The difference that makes a difference’ (Bateson, 1972)

Bateson encourages us to spot the difference that creates a new possibility. The work of Burnham et al. (2008) and White and Epston (1990) adds to ethical practice the journey of exploring the novel and the unexpected and difference. Systemic practice therefore is ethically placed to guide practices in the shared doing of relationships in which power is negotiated.

### **Dialogue as Relational and Embodied**

Dialogue has informed me throughout my practice and orientated me in this inquiry. It is woven into the writing of this thesis as a feature that is embedded within reflexive practice and inquiry. Everything is relational and identity is dialogical in character, extending beyond itself and to other partners in dialogue.

Through ‘dialogue and dialogic’ interaction, other persons participate in the process of co-creating and inviting the other into a relationship (Bakhtin, 1990).

In the context of relationship, therefore, all are involved in the shaping and construction of identity (Vygotsky, 1978). ‘Knowledge of the third kind’ refers to a relational knowledge constructed in the interactions between persons (Shotter and Billig, 1998). In relationships and language orientated by dialogue, both relationships and human life are perceived as being engulfed within a dialogical space in which ‘open-ended dialogue’ takes place (Bakhtin, 1984).

‘In this dialogue a person participates with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds’ (Bakhtin, 1984).

The living experience and the narrative we give to it are placed under the spotlight in exploring moments of being together. I use a zoom lens in looking at how we include an exploration of relational embodied reflexivity and invite conversations and inquiry from within our encounters. From each of the conversations and dialogical excerpts emerge the different vantage points of relational embodied inquiry.

### **The Use of Metaphor in Inquiry**

One of the multiple functions of metaphor is to create a link between the biological world and mental processes, and Bateson in his later work cited the significance of metaphors: ‘Metaphors represent the logic upon which the biological world was built. It is the main characteristic of the organisation of mental processes’ (Bateson, 1980).

Metaphor as an inquiry tool is something that has not been considered in the field of inquiry. In practice, however, whilst we can never assume the meaning we give to metaphor, there are all sorts of richness of unique local meanings that come from entering into these when offered. Bruner (1986) writes about the way in which, when once utilised, the metaphors that seep into our speech are either discarded or hidden from view. They are ‘crutches to help us get up the abstract mountain’ (Bruner, 1986, p.48). In my practice I resist the urge to understand metaphors too quickly and prefer to accept these as providing possibilities for new and novel understandings. I am using the particular metaphor of a climb – explored and developed further in the next chapter – as something novel and new in inquiry terms, inspired by

Andersen's (1996) words: 'If we always see and hear things as we are accustomed to, then we will miss, neither see nor hear, that which is different and unique' (Andersen, 1996, p.133).

## **Where This Leads**

I am introducing a relational, embodied, reflexive lens as one way amongst many of conducting this inquiry. Relational, embodied, reflexive inquiry is explored more fully through the use of this particular metaphor of the climb in the next chapter. I enter this space with humility, having gained the confidence to do so from the huge volume of inspirational influences cited. The invitation to the reader is to suspend some assumptions and certainties about inquiry, to extend and stretch a bit further into this section within a spirit of exploration with 'I' in practice and inquiry as an embodied, dynamic, evolving being. In this way I hope to create a sense that 'the metaphor is alive' (Ricoeur, 1972) through the way I am using it in this inquiry in its relational embodied reflexive capacity.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **AN ECOLOGY OF EMBODIED REFLEXIVE INQUIRY: SYSTEMIC POSITIONING**

This chapter develops further the concept of an embodied reflexive approach to inquiry within a philosophical orientation as discussed in the previous chapter. I explore the concept of embodiment, acknowledging the challenge of this type of approach for the many research discourses that call for structure and logic. I consider the concept of embodiment as being interwoven within the fabric of dialogue, and I build on the ideas explored in the previous chapters of my systemic positioning within embodied moments of conversation with others through the embodied metaphor of the rock climbing. I have become increasingly aware of the extent to which I have made sense of the world through metaphor, visual pictures, movement and the senses, thereby enabling and extending my systemic positioning, my thinking, my reflections on and in practice, and my reflections within this inquiry and in the writing process also. Some of the inherent challenges are examined here, and the importance of finding a way through these challenges in order to extend practice is considered through illuminating features of an embodied reflexive approach. This prepares for outlining the specific metaphor of the climb in Chapter 6 and how I make use of it throughout.

#### **The activity of climbing**

The necessary climbing equipment, or ‘gear’, discussed in the last chapter was likened to systemic gear. This includes the approach I take, the creativity to move into multiple positions to respond to others, the asking of different types of questions, the different activities to create different preferred narratives and so on. Within all of these varied systemic practice activities there is a connection and an attention to the ethical rope that enables everyone to take safe risks and move out of comfort zones. I am moving and positioning in a way that responds to the movement of others, moving into positions that enable our activities together. This positioning sometimes requires me to be still or silent as I encourage others’ moves, and attention is paid for example, to what is happening in the silent and yet very active spaces of the pauses in conversation with Lorna in Chapter 6. Systemic positioning helps enable movement for all climbers together.

A climber enters into a spirit of a climb with no step-by-step climbing textbook for the experience, but with some general principles as a framework. These include paying attention to fellow climbers and the changing environment, being alert to and trusting all the senses, anticipating what is ahead, and also being ready to move unexpectedly into a different position when required. Focusing on the immediacy of the moment, what is clearly in view whilst being receptive and alert to what may be hidden, is part of the positioning process as some moves are made over others. A vast range of mostly spontaneous moves is made to fit the situation. A similar level of attention is paid within systemic encounters as a therapist or practitioner as a means of feeling a way through conversations with others. A climber, like a systemic practitioner in conversation, enters a relationship mutually engaged with others, connected, committed in the act of climbing (dialogue); these are all features of a climber's (and systemic practitioner's) disposition to be embodied, responsive and ready to reposition.

### **The Dualism that Separates Mind and Body**

It is helpful to understand what has informed such a distinctive paradox of mind/body dualism and the theoretical struggles posed within a theoretical and inquiry domain. These are problems that systemic therapy practice seems to have avoided. Descartes's philosophy was the product of a time in which there was a decline in the authority of the church and a corresponding rise of the secular authorities and secular styles of knowledge. Without such authorities to interpret the world, individuals such as Descartes sought understanding through the power of reason. The transition from an authoritarian to an autonomous mode of thinking led to more careful self-examination, viewing bodily sensations and emotions as objects to be scrutinised, categorised, regulated, controlled and tested by doubt. Here, then, the body became the object of the mind and separate from the body. Foucault (1967; 1977) wrote about the body becoming the focus for relations of power and in the process being turned into a machine through the forces of regulation and discipline. It links to Descartes's notion of the body as automation. Foucault's (1986a) later work suggested power exerted over the individual and over his or her body was not just about social forms of regulation but also to do with self-regulation.

A narrative dominated by Cartesian notions of dualism of self, which saw the body as separate from the mind, to be acted upon even as a commodity, emerged in and dominated a number of different fields including the sciences, the arts and literature; the concept of mindless bodies has been further contributed to by the field of biological psychiatry (Bertrando, 2000). Within the medical field the focus on linking



symptoms with neural structure seems to be a dominant model and runs the risk of being too linear and reductionist. The field has separated the brain out further, with no attempt to explore the relationship between the brain and the body and the ways they make sense together.

Through this perspective an important distinction emerges between lived experience and descriptions of experience, with the latter taking prominence in theoretical discourse across many disciplines (Bakhtin, 1981).

### **Embodiment and Dialogue: Embodying Ethics**

Bakhtin (1981) suggests that authoritative discourse is finite and demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own. Dialogue, in contrast, is open. Meanings are generated and transformed from response to response. The more voices that are incorporated into a ‘polyphonic’ dialogue, the richer the possibilities for emergent understandings. Dialogue is a way of thinking together, where understanding is formed between the participants as something that exceeds the possibilities of a single person. To achieve this, the parties need to turn towards responses, to listen and be heard. The body is central. Bakhtin (1981) describes the challenge as that of blindness and persistent deafness to concrete ideological reality; the reality of things and social actions and the complex material relations which interpenetrate this reality.

We are most inclined to imagine ideological creation as some inner process of understanding, comprehension and perception, and do not notice that it in fact unfolds externally, for the eye, the ear and the hand. It is not within us but between us (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978, p.8).

Medvedev and Bakhtin (1978) acknowledge that the ideology that separates the body from mind has created certain habits of thought and research that are not easy to overcome. They shift the emphasis to emerging meaning-making of embodied persons evolving in the embodied relationship and details of interaction with each other.

Every ideological product and all its ‘ideal meaning’ is not in the soul, not in the inner world, and not in the detached world of ideas and pure thoughts, but in the objectively accessible ideological material – in the word, in sound, in gesture, in the combination of masses, lines, colors, living bodies, and so on (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978, p.8).

Every ideological product is part of the material social reality surrounding man, ‘an aspect of the materialized ideological horizon’ (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978, p.8). Whatever a word might mean it is first of all materially present, uttered, written, printed, whispered or thought and so objectively constitutes part of our social environment objectively expressed in the combined reactions of people in words, gestures, acts, organisations and so on.

To be means to communicate ... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is always on the boundary; looking inside himself he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another (Bakhtin, 1993, p.114).

Bakhtin recognizes here that it is only as we think, speak and act in a participative way that we are reflexively aware, sensitive and responsive. This for me is one of the fundamentals of ethical positioning in that it is performative, embodied and reflexive, what McNamee and Gergen (1999) have called ‘relational responsibility’.

## **Multiple Relationships and Contexts Informing Embodied Persons**

There is growing interest in the literature which sees identity as being informed by multiple contexts including the historical (conditions), cultural evolution, and scientific breakthroughs and conventions that all impact on both body and mind. However, in many ways the body has remained invisible or less attended to. An alternative position to embodiment is one that considers human beings ‘embodied persons as becoming identified within the multiple relations in which they are located and which, as agents, they change through their mutual interactions’ (Burkitt, 1999, p.12). What has become known as ‘self’ cannot be separated from, and is actually closely related to, the body, and interacts with the environment through it. Our sense of who we are starts through our body from birth in bodily interactions with caring figures (Stern, 1995) and this sense of our identity also develops within a system of interrelationships. It becomes difficult to draw the line between ‘exact’ identities; therefore we are always in the act of becoming. I relate to this in terms of my Irish heritage and growing up in a different culture to that of my parents, and to the connections within the conversations with parents and staff at the primary school explored in Chapters 2 and 3, and in fact most of the conversations from which this inquiry stems; most of us participants are second-generation immigrants in Britain. In Chapter 3, for example, our emerging values

and beliefs were not within the things that were ‘British’ nor within the experiences of the cultures of our parents; through embodied connections to sights, sounds, smells and our associations, personal stories and the sharing of voices from other generations we were able to reposition. This opened a space to talk about our different experiences, other voices and people we were influenced by in our current views and relationships and also our emerging cultures and those of our children and young people to build on our preferred relationships for the home and school community.

### **Embodiment in Systemic Practice: Keeping Ethical Embodied Reflexive Questions Alive**

Looking at embodiment within systemic practices the significance of paying attention to the wisdom of the body crosses into multiple systemic domains including therapy, supervision, community practices, network meetings and everyday conversations with groups and individuals (professional and non-professional). Systemic practitioners (Satir, 1985; Andersen, 1990; hooks, 1994; Fredman, 2007; Betrand and Gill, 2008) focus on the body within the therapeutic frame, saying that a great deal can be learned by observing clients’ bodily responses – breathing patterns, a pause, cough, tears, whether hands are closed or open, etc.

‘Language comprises all kinds of utterances. This includes both words (sounds) and bodily activities’ (Andersen, 1998, p.75).

Understanding the practice of therapeutic dialogues constantly involves ethical questions, as we ‘feel our way through various activities without any discernible distinction’ between the processes of words and bodily activities (Burkitt, 1999, p.20). Ethical questions are constantly being generated as we move through an unfolding, ambiguous complex process.

### **Attending to Language: Written and Spoken**

I am aware that in different versions of my writings I had fallen into the trap of over-intellectualising or theorising too much, of absencing myself from my embodied sensate livingness in episodes of interaction with others. The trap I had fallen into was of portraying, in the writing, invisible bodies in ‘disembodied dialogues’ (Betrand and Gilli, 2008). What they also refer to as ‘mindless bodies’ became very apparent in the initial conversation I was invited into, illustrated in Chapters 8 and 9, with the multi-professional

group around the issue of ‘anti-social behaviour’. I had a very strong gut reaction, detailed in Chapter 8, about the way young people were initially being discussed by various professional and non-professional adults, who described them as bodies that were ‘out of control’ and even ‘mindless’. I explore in the coming chapters moments where I am struck by an utterance and the reciprocal responses and positions negotiated as we go on together. I was moved by being in dialogue with Joe (Chapter 1) and Fatimah (Chapter 2).

‘... words may mis-describe the events because they cannot capture the horror of them ... tellers and listeners share both the spoken and the unspoken.’ (Roberts, 1994, pp. 9-11).

As I sat with the group of parents and listened, it was as though Fatimah’s words rippled through my body: ‘I sat at my son’s hospital bedside’. Fatimah was talking from her heart and we were profoundly touched.

[W]ords are not only heard or received but they also move the talker. These movements can be seen and felt by the listener, who in turn is moved. Therefore we touch each other and ourselves with our expressions and the words we speak move both ourselves and others to different positions (Fredman 2007, p.49).

Bertrando and Gilli (2008) stimulated current interest in supervision practices around mindfulness. I would suggest, however, that even the language of ‘mindfulness’ implies a higher status of the mind, and that dualism of the mind exists. Whilst the practices of mind/body approaches are hugely valuable, the language continues to suggest the privileging of the mind. I propose ‘bodyfulness’ to illustrate the resourceful positions offered within this frame and to counter what has been an imbalance.

### **Bodyfulness: Acknowledging ‘Felt Sense’ and the Challenges of Inquiry of a Different Kind**

There are a number of challenges in setting forth embodied reflexive inquiry, not least because of the demand for structure and logic in many academic research discourses. Description within this type of inquiry becomes a challenge because bodily sensations and ‘embodiment’, while easily acknowledged as something felt it are not so easy to describe. The term ‘felt sense’ (Gendlin, 1997; 2003) recognises our bodily awareness of a person, event (encounter) or situation. This is something he describes as having an important function in what we perceive and think, and how we behave, yet is something other than sense

perception and logical schemes; our thinking is beyond pattern. He describes it in the realm of physical, not mental, experience. He uses the metaphors of taste and musical chords to describe 'felt sense' that impacts powerfully and is puzzling, coming not in the form of words and thoughts but 'as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily feeling' (Gendlin, 2003, pp.32-33). Gendlin (1997, p.1) saw that experience was usually construed 'as a logical scheme that organizes sense perceptions or as a logical construct that intervenes to relate and predict observations of behaviors' and recognised this as too narrow. Actually applying abstract concepts and logic to experience highlights the third challenge, that even the act of writing runs the risk of reducing and deadening dynamic livingness. Through the dialogical excerpts, details of episodes of conversation and running reflections and the application of metaphor I hope to give a sense of the livingness of being with others in conversation; 'any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp the world' (Johnson, 1987, p.xii). The metaphor of the climb detailed later in this chapter creates a route through the 'felt sense' of experience, navigating through some of the dualisms and allowing me to move within the portrayal itself.

We are located in everyday relations as embodied beings, with connections to other people and with our own experiences that cannot really be compartmentalised. In daily experiences, when we think and feel our way through various activities without any discernible distinction between the two processes, and when we constantly realise our relations to the others with whom we are interdependent, the something of this experience cuts across the forces of dualism (Burkitt, 1999, p.20).

The way I am writing here, therefore, is stylistically more evocative of being within experiences as a way of shifting from tunnelled, single reductive terms and entering the detail of 'everyday relations as embodied beings' (Burkitt, 1999, p.20). This is with the aim, in both practice and inquiry, of extending understandings of how we position our way through the various activities of conversation with others. I have made explicit my internal dialogue, my external responses and the reciprocal responses as we continue moving through dialogue interdependently in the conversational space.

## **Embodiment, the Emotions and the Relational Brain**

In conversation with people in therapy or in everyday conversations there is a poignant power to be struck and moved. I am curious about how we position ourselves in a way that enables us to go on in many and varied ways together in these moments.

‘In a biological sense, an emotion is a dynamic disposition of the body for action.’ (Griffith and Elliott, 1994, p.45).

Being curious about where, how and in what contexts people develop unique ways of ‘doing’ particular feelings is a systemic position to take regarding emotions. I deconstruct ‘doing’ anger in a conversation with Mohamed in Chapter 7. The exploration of how emotions become embodied is explored further in that chapter. Through positioning alongside Mohamed in the grammar of his metaphor of colour his embodied position is challenged and he adopts a new position, one of resourcefulness to calm himself down in situations where he becomes angry.

In the context of embodiment, emotions have a powerful embodied manifestations at times and attention has been paid to movements, bodily signals, and tone of voice, and particular connections have been made with the specifics of neuroscience and brain activity as detailed in a question put by Satir: ‘What am I doing? I am accessing the right brain when I ask somebody how they feel and when I help them to connect with parts of their body’ (Satir, 2000, p.170)).

Continuing on from the work of Satir, research in neuroscience on the activity of mirror neurons and motor neurons shows them activated when we move, when we conceive a movement, and when we see another person moving. This demonstrates that the distinction between thought and action may be considered an artefact.

Acts and actions which are bodily within this neurological frame become merged with mind reflections; they are the same. It is in these acts (not so much merely movements) that our experience of the environment around us and other actors in that space is embodied and shapes/has an immediate meaning. The interaction is inherently relational; the brain is also in action and the concept is highlighted of ‘the acting brain’ and ‘understanding brain’ (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2006, p.3). This places body and mind in inter-responsive relationship and the feelings and senses manifest within this relationship.

## **Becoming Bodyful and Mindful in Practice and Inquiry: An Embodied Moment of Awakening and Being Moved**

Stern (2004) uses the term *kairos* to signify the propitious moment, the moment of something coming into being, the process of being in the moment, and of beginning moments that other beginning moments do not provide. I experienced *kairos* with Fatimah, a mother waiting at her son's bedside, as detailed in Chapter 2. The more I reflected on this episode of conversation and the degree to which it resonated with me, this *kairos* came into view as a special moment, there was an emergence of a sequence of special moments leading to change in actions. Stern (2004) describes them as being short, emotional and lived. As Fatimah spoke, her eyes welling with tears and her voice weakening, there was an embracing receptivity in the room, a physical and emotional reaching out from myself and others in our presence; as we bore witness to Fatimah's story, her pain was suspended in that moment and there was a collective sensitivity which was apparent although very few words were spoken. I invited people to connect from different positions; I connected as an aunt, and others joined me, speaking as uncles, brothers, sisters, each one representing a human position of what it means for a family member in a community where serious hurt, harm, illness or loss has happened. I was also informed by my personal story of my own family moving through a process of heightened pain and worry at a loved one's bedside as he lay in a hospital bed in a critical condition.

‘... for there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience’ (hooks, 1994, p.91).

I reflected on what is awakened in these moments and how we position and reposition in the ‘presence’ of others and are present for the other in the moment. Stern pays attention to the present moment in everyday experience, exploring the ‘now’ and its implications. The response comes through what I term ‘embodied presence’, that shifts and moves in response to others. ‘Therapists bring their own biographical lived-body to the situation and it is by sharing these experiences that an embodied therapeutic narrative can be developed’ (Shaw, 2003, p.46).

## **Summary and Where Embodied Reflexive Inquiry Points me**

I have discussed in this chapter how embodied reflexive inquiry offers a way to position and reposition in moments when I am moved and respond with a gut feeling, a sense that something is working or not working, a connection or disconnection as a systemic therapist and practitioner; ‘a tacit knowing’ when ‘We know more than we can tell’ and ‘most of this knowledge cannot be put into words’ (Polanyi, 1966, p.4). Some of the challenges I have described in this chapter are probably experienced by most systemic writers, theorists and practitioners whose lived experience is embodied interacting with other bodies, of putting tacit knowledge into words. I have presented an exploration of embodied knowledge and bodily knowing.

The next chapter offers a detailed look at metaphor, and the metaphor of rock climbing more specifically, to develop its use in the practice, and the vignettes aim to illustrate this in the following chapters.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **EMBODIED REFLEXIVITY AND SYSTEMIC POSITIONING THROUGH A ROCK CLIMBING LENS**

#### **Metaphor of Rock Climbing: Setting the Scene for the Use of the Rock Climbing Metaphor**

This chapter develops the exploration of systemic positioning within conversations by inserting the details of the specific metaphor of rock climbing. This is in order to consider its potential use as an embodied reflexive inquiry tool. I continue to enter into the details of episodes of conversations I have with individuals and groups over the following chapters using the climbing metaphor more extensively, especially in Chapters 8 and 9. An emergent climbing frame of sequencing moves applies features of rock climbing as a way of entering the dynamic, embodied, relational complexity of systemic positioning within the movement of conversations. There are many and varied others with whom I am in conversation, including young people, parents, other community members and a diverse range of professionals, who are part of the multi-agency meeting discussed in Chapters 8 and 9. Attention is paid to the way I enter these meetings and conversations as I move to positions and repositions that are about joining and co-creating collaborative team events in the conversations. The picture this conjures up for me is of a team of climbers in the activity of rock climbing, informed by and informing each other as we move into different positions in scaling a rock face. It is a relational team endeavour, as the move of one climber affects the movement of everyone in this team. This chapter develops the concept of metaphor, specifically in the field of family therapy, the rationale for choosing rock climbing as a specific metaphor and my personal connection to this activity, and builds on ideas discussed in previous chapters.

The latter part of the chapter shows how I am applying this metaphor to enter the detail of moments, movements and positioning in conversation with Lorna. There is an invitation to the reader to extend and stretch also within a spirit of exploration as 'I' position myself as an embodied, dynamic, evolving being. In this way I hope to create a sense that 'the metaphor is alive' (Ricoeur, 1972) through its use. A discussion of the degree to which it is useful in enhancing understanding of systemic positioning will be found in Chapter 10.

This way of doing inquiry may feel as unfamiliar to the reader at times as it has for me in the process of exploration, in much the same way as scaling a particular rock face for the first time or trekking a newly trodden path. Each step is opening new learning for me, and sets forth a potential alternative way to consider positioning within inquiry possibly and to create new movements. I consider this as representing a process of stepping off of a safe ledge, as described in Chapter 4, out of what may be seen as a more familiar inquiry comfort zone.

Using the climbing metaphor also involves a degree of risk-taking on my part. It offers a close-range view of my practice, for one thing, while the use of the climbing metaphor as an embodied reflexive inquiry tool presents a different kind of risk in terms of how it is perceived in the world of academic communities, for example, as not being valid or authoritative enough. The rock or ground we are about to step onto together is likely to feel uncertain, a sensation I have experienced both as a systemic practitioner in practice and a rock climber on a climb. A commitment is made, however, as a systemic practitioner, to embrace uncertainty, to remain attentive in the unknowing space; in this sense, in my view, it is important that systemic inquiry reflects this uncertainty. I continue in the spirit illustrated in previous vignettes of curiosity of conversational encounters as relational processes. I focus on the detail of how multiple positions evolve in the process of responding to each other in the interaction, and particular attention is paid to what I term systemic poise in the conversation with Lorna.

I aim to be explicit about what has organised me, including the influences outlined under a social constructionist umbrella (Gergen, 1985; 1992; 1999), a relational constructionist position (McNamee and Hosking, 2012) and, more specifically here, an embodied reflexive orientation. This takes into account the personal and relational positions influencing my decision, in these moments, to act in certain ways.

My commitment to using this metaphor, of course, is to be questioned following Cecchin's (1992) idea of showing irreverence to our own prejudices and thus bias in using particular metaphors. Therefore I aim to take a position of irreverence towards my argument in the final chapter.

## **Metaphor**

Etymologically the word metaphor derives from the Greek term *metapherein* meaning to carry over, to transfer, referring to the carrying over of meaning from one subject to another denoting a likeness or analogy between the two subjects.

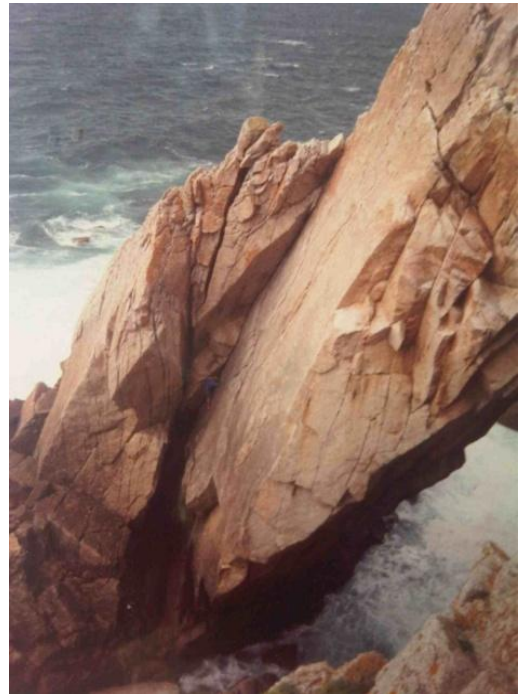
Use of metaphor in language has been extensively studied and written about by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and views of metaphors have become very influential across the fields of philosophy, psychology and the social sciences. 'Metaphor, it is argued, is a fundamental mechanism that allows us to use what we know about our physical and social experience to provide understanding in a wide range of other areas' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.7).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980; 1999) argue that metaphors structure our thinking and actions, and suggest that we conceptualise our subjective experiences through references to other domains of experience in trying to deal with the complexity of our subjective mental life. There are multiple functions of metaphor, therefore, one being to create a link between our biological world and mental processes. Bateson (1980) in his later work cited the significance of metaphors: 'Metaphors represent the logic upon which the biological world was built. It is the main characteristic of the organisation of mental processes.'

Metaphor has pervaded the field of family therapy in different ways. Minuchin's metaphor of family as organism emphasises the family as holistic and the therapist as relatively interventionist, an artist and warrior (Minuchin, 1980, 1984). Whitaker and Bumbery (1988) use the metaphor of therapist as coach and family as team, giving rise to the cooperation between team and coach with mutual investment in the same outcome. Although the relative degree to which they see the therapist versus the family contributing to the outcome of therapy differs, both assume the therapist's expertise in the same relative way. Metaphor is valued by therapists in practice in terms, for example, of enhancing a therapeutic understanding through the imagery and metaphors in client stories (Lankton and Lankton, 1989; Cederborg, 2000; Burns, 2005; Burns, 2007). Metaphors have been used by family therapists in their practices drawing on social constructivist understanding of metaphor and meaning-making as a kind of frame that invites us to see certain aspects of reality. At the same time it leaves another aspect of reality in the dark. This is referred to as metaphoric systematicity (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), and has been previously used as an analytical tool in the research of metaphors (Rosenblatt, 1994; Nadeau, 2006; Rosenblatt, 2008). Most of the research concentrated mainly on metaphor in language until the recent work of Van Parys and Rober (2013). With the exception of their study, that focuses on the way the metaphorical language of therapists evolves over the course of a session, there has been a gap in inquiry in this area. The use of a specific metaphor in the way I am using one here, as a potential reflexive inquiry tool, marks a difference to other research on metaphor.

## Rock Climbing

Climbing, as with many pursuits that impassion and grip us as human beings, such as music and art or other movement and sporting activities, incorporates a wide spectrum of genres, styles, preferences, philosophical stances and technical features, just as classical music is very different to improvised jazz. Climbing on an actual rock face, known as traditional rock and mountain climbing, involves a team setting up a route on a rock face without bolts on mountainous terrains, coastal cliffs or crags set in hillside regions. This is very different to pre-existing bolted routes on indoor walls, or sports climbs. Distinguishing features of traditional rock climbing, as opposed to indoor wall climbing, are its rawness, its uncertainty, the importance of a team, the ever-changing environment and elements, the unpredictability, and the fact



that anything can happen, requiring a team of climbers to adjust and reassess their moves together at any time. It is an embodied and relational activity. Climbing a mountain pass, rock face or sea cliff means being engaged and involved in what is happening in the climbing dynamic, and also being attuned to a whole array of external features such as crashing waves below, fast-moving clouds, wildlife such as birds nesting and the like that may impact on the positions taken at any point in time. All are part of the unpredictable mix, and both movement and occasional still points, such as pauses at balanced points, become essential; it is necessary to be still and reflect on how to go on. This connects to my experience of being in practice: I examine both the active movement as I respond to the others, and the quiet still and quietly active spaces of my inner dialogue as I am responding to the verbal and non-verbal outer moves and positions of others. This informs the positions I move through in my reciprocal outer moves, and is explored more within the context of being conversational partners and team members in dialogue. Climbing, like systemic practice, is a relational endeavour, each climber relying on and responding to the moves and responses of the other(s) in the act of making moves of one kind or another. Each movement creates a tension or a slackness of the rope and there is a balancing act where climbers are attentive to tension and flow that enables freedom of movement for each member of the team. Each person has a unique way of climbing, there are different paces, styles of movement, preferences for types of rock to

climb and so on; each has its own language game (Wittgenstein, 1953) that is embodied and responsive and much of which is unspoken.

### **The Metaphor of the Climb: Rationale and Fit with Embodied Reflexive ‘Inquiry’**

My passion for climbing has grown over the years and locates me in a process of ongoing learning, of developing a philosophical stance towards a way of being on a climb. A parallel process is also in play in terms of my development as a systemic practitioner and inquirer finding a philosophical stance and a way to position and reposition. There is something deeply personal about the climbing metaphor as it is more than an activity or set of skills, it is an aesthetic endeavour, a process of creating moves together. Risk is also a feature; within my climbing community we are deeply attentive to this given the loss of a climbing friend whilst pursuing this activity. There must be an acute attention to risk: nothing can be taken for granted, and the highest context is to ensure the safety of others in the process that may be inherently risky, whether it is the conversational activity or the activity of rock climbing. This tension relates somehow to the embodied sense of encouraging positions that may be out of a comfort zone for myself and others whilst being attuned to creating as much safety as possible. This process of relational risk taking (Mason, 2005) is happening in the process of therapeutic dialogue and there is a need for therapists to demonstrate the taking of risks ourselves if we expect others to take risks (hooks, 1994).

In the act of climbing I am placed as a sentient being moving, being still and in coordination with others; it is a living, evolving process and learning is ongoing. I approach both my practice and inquiry in the same way as I participate with other climbers on a climb, being ‘bodily spontaneous, expressive and responsive to the otherness’ (Shotter, 2003a). No two climbs are the same, and therefore something new and novel emerges in the experience similar to the activity of dialogical conversations and in the unfolding relationships as connections and understandings are formed and learning is ongoing.

I have had a sense at times, in meetings and being with others in conversation, akin to the sense of being in the process of a climb. I am embodied and embedded with other embodied beings interdependent in terms of how we go on: ‘we think and feel our way through various activities without any discernible distinction between the two processes, and .... we constantly realise our relations to the others ...’ (Burkitt, 1999, p.20). As a systemic practitioner ambiguity, uncertainty and surprises are like how I feel a way through, at times, grappling with holds, losing balance, finding my feet and rebalancing. I pay attention to my felt sense of things. I question a ‘tacit’ (Polyani, 1966) or implicit knowing, and how the

different forms of knowledge have different pulls at times. Adding to my learning through reading, theory, philosophical positions, conceptual tools and previous experience, I am exploring also the aspects of practice that have greater resonance with climbing in terms of feeling for footholds and handholds that are not immediately apparent and may be very concealed at times. This connects with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) point about metaphoric systematicity as both see certain aspects of reality while leaving other aspects of reality in the dark. I am curious about what emerges in terms of my blind spots with the need to shift position as these become apparent.

The need to move at a pace that allows me to look closely, paying attention to what is immediately in front of me as well as having a peripheral vision and sense of what is around me, is something that I am alert to as a climber and in the conversations I am in, whether in a therapy session or everyday conversations as a systemic practitioner. The need as a climber to feel for different foot- and handholds that are not obvious, to notice, requires looking and looking again, and connects with Wittgenstein's point 'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes)' (1953, p.129). In my conversation with Lorna I became increasingly aware of the degree to which I had taken the pause for granted in my practice, as if its reflexive potential had become steadily evident: slowing the pace, opening space for our reflections, inviting curiosity about sense-making in the moment with each other and relational check-ins about our engagement. This vignette is a brief snapshot in the context of inviting Lorna into a curiosity and expressiveness through the senses in the conversation and perhaps required us both to take a risk.

### ***Case Illustration***

#### **The Poise: Being Poised and 'Braced' for and in the Moment**

'I had to brace myself, let go, and trust the space ...' Lorna (Parent)

#### **The 'Overwhelming Challenges' for Lorna, a Mother Concerned for her Son in Trouble**

This case illustration involves a conversation with Lorna who described facing overwhelming challenges with her son and being very concerned about the trouble he was in. It is significant in terms of the direct

use of the climbing metaphor in the conversation itself as it appeared in the foreground of my practice as I stumbled upon its usefulness. I found myself drawing on many features of the metaphor in my inner dialogue because it provided such a wealth of reflexive possibilities, opening up a greater attention to my positioning in response to being with Lorna in dialogue, and extending a self- and relational exploration in the detail of the evolving talking and listening space between us.

The comment ‘I had to brace myself, let go, and trust the space ...’ came from that conversation with Lorna, as she described her experience of wanting to say something to her son but ‘holding back’ so as to keep open a listening space for her son. There were connecting senses for me in this conversation as I found myself teetering between two positions, my eagerness to say something and yet not quite knowing, but sensing from noticing Lorna’s non-verbal movements, a need to hold back and leave a space open. I was curious about how we were positioning together in what were experienced for both of us as elongated pauses. The term I use to express this positioning sense is one of being poised as a climber is poised in readiness and alertness for the movement ahead without knowing what that movement is going to be. This connected directly to Lorna’s description of ‘being braced’.

I explore the spaces, including the pauses, in the conversation, and the lead-up to a moment in conversation where there is a change in the way Lorna talks about her situation and relationship. I look at what is happening in our dialogue in that space as our positions evolve and the conversation moves and shifts, and I look at what seems to create a difference to Lorna’s talk.

## **Context**

I had met with Lorna in a series of meetings with parents in a community context focusing on building relationships within the local neighbourhood and talking together about concerns and hopes. Lorna requested an individual conversation with me, wanting to explore ways to go on with her son as she felt her relationship with him was breaking down. She had settled in London from Morocco 20 years earlier and had largely brought up her three sons on her own. Omer, at fifteen, was the youngest. As Lorna spoke a critical narrative dominated her talk: ‘I know I am a bad mother’. She expressed frustration and felt ‘judged’ by the Moroccan community and her family for ‘failing to control’ her son. Lorna told me her son ‘had been getting into trouble with the police and was facing a serious court case’. In response to this I spent time with Lorna deconstructing these descriptions, and took the position of respectfully noticing any discrepancies. It felt like I was also positioning myself as a defender of a space for openings that

Lorna offered in the talk so as to build on ‘unique outcomes’ (White, 1995; 2007) against the dominant narrative being told. Lorna continued in a very negative, self-blaming way. Whilst defending an appreciative space for Lorna, there seemed to be a position I needed to move into that would guide Lorna to the space of appreciation, and I was reflecting spontaneously in the moment as I asked Lorna about her experience in relation to others who help her, those who see and notice her abilities and qualities.

I became curious about Lorna’s response, as she chose to position in a way that focused on the influences and voices of constraining others: ‘They don’t know me at all, they don’t know my son. They only see the negatives and pile all sorts of other things on top. They don’t see or hear us at all.’ [Pause]

As Lorna was speaking I noticed her looking down to the floor; it seemed difficult to make eye contact. I wanted to challenge the blaming narrative and yet I also recognised that this powerful narrative may take time to change (Hedges, 2005).

This was a hesitant pause on my part, and perhaps quite an overwhelming one, as I was getting a sense from Lorna’s body language as she continued to look down, of the heaviness and weight bearing down from a proliferation of blaming discourses.

Helen: ‘If your son was here what would he be saying about his experience and how that affects his relationship with you his mum?’

Lorna continued to describe her sense of negative perceptions of others towards her and her son and some of the judgements she felt were being made of her as a parent, mother and woman. On a societal level blaming discourses abound (Cooperrider, 1990), and my inner wonderings were curious as to who ‘they’ were. How did Lorna see me? As another professional bearing a stamp of an agency and drawing attention to problems and shortcomings, or as someone giving an opinion and having something to say about Lorna and her family when actually I knew nothing of how the family got through such stresses. I put this question to Lorna: ‘Who helps you get through these stresses?’ I was positioning myself in a counter-position to the descriptions Lorna had been presenting, and trying to invite Lorna to distance herself from these descriptions and to take a position that would be more self-appreciative. My counter-stance was an attempt to offset what seemed like a heavily weighted deficit and bring it to a more appreciative balance. I continued to ask more appreciative-orientated questions about Lorna’s abilities, ‘ability-spotting’ the best of what is and has been (Lang and McAdam, 1997).



Helen: ‘What are you drawing on in her being there for your family, your care and commitment despite these stresses? How would your son and others describe your abilities?’

Lorna still found this difficult, and described the constant judgements and negative scrutiny her family was under. As a climber this type of feedback indicates that co-climbers in the team need more bridging steps; something more is needed to make a move and I was picking up a sense of this in the conversation at this point.

Bakhtin (1981) points out that authoritative discourse is finite and demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own. I wanted Lorna to have the authority and make it her own. I wondered whether I had been too leading in questions that did not fit for Lorna. I responded by appreciating the act of talking here with concern and insight, and I was wondering whether there had been a ‘unique outcome’ (White, 1995, 200) that had been glaringly obvious but simply not yet seen. This seemed an important juncture at which to check out our relational space of talk and whether it was the way Lorna had hoped it would be in the conversation. I also wanted to inquire as to how she might like to position me. I tentatively asked if it was ok to draw on the words she had used earlier.

Helen: ‘How would you like me to be here with you right now; to see and hear you in this conversation? If you were to guide that seeing and listening what new sights and sounds would you like us to bring together?’

Lorna responded by saying she wanted to talk about her worry and tension. She described being ‘wound up beyond belief’ which manifested in a self-description of ‘having a short fuse’ with Omer; ‘any little thing’ would cause her to ‘shout at him’. She also described feeling a mixture of emotions, being ‘full of panic’ about the prospect of possibly losing her son to a custodial sentence, ‘powerless’ about what she could do, and also ‘very angry’ with her son for mixing with peers he knew to be a negative influence.

[Pause]

I stayed poised in the conversation. There was so much in Lorna’s utterance that had all sorts of potential for different directions to move in and towards with Lorna, but I avoided taking one route too quickly at this stage. I was mindful of the fact that this family had been through different types of questioning from police and court staff and various statutory professionals, and this guided me to be more tentative about my questions and how I was asking them. I was also acutely aware of various contexts informing me as I

considered the most helpful and respectful way of going on with Lorna. I reflected on my professional position, and the context of race, being a white woman. My cultural heritage came closer to me in this moment with a flush of frustration at the injustice and discrimination Lorna had experienced and I was concerned about the extent to which Lorna had not been heard or noticed. I wanted her to know that I had heard this and I wanted to privilege an appreciative way of being with Lorna in this conversation. A mixture of thoughts and feelings presented themselves to me quite physically in my stomach. I wondered whether Lorna wanted a space to talk about this or to stay exploring the relationship and I was poised to ask an appreciative question: ‘Can you talk me through a time when you were not angry with your son? When you did not have a short fuse or feel panicked?’ I stopped myself, however, and instead made the space to check with Lorna her understanding and to offer her the opportunity to feed back on the different strands of her response.

Helen: ‘How do you understand feeling “wound up beyond belief”, “having a short fuse” with Omer, and how is it connected to feeling “full of panic” about the prospect of possibly losing your son to a custodial sentence and feeling “powerless”?’

[Pause]

Lorna started to make eye contact in this pause. This felt highly significant as she started to talk about issues of discrimination, of justice, and of labelling, connecting them to wider issues of discrimination. There was a shift in the grammar towards more appreciation of her family’s struggles.

It seemed that Lorna was moving into a space where she might be open for additional noticing of abilities as I asked her permission to offer my reflections. I invited a mini-reflecting conversation, a space where Lorna and I could reflect from a different position about our talk. I also wanted to highlight my appreciation of Lorna’s resilience as a mother, cataloguing the strengths and abilities I had noticed from our conversation. I also shared my noticing about the process of our talk and how thoughtful Lorna was, inviting Lorna’s responses to these reflections. She said that she had never been described as thoughtful and this was something she wanted to explore further. There seemed to be more relational positioning between us at this point.

I am reminded of how the slightest moves made in the moment on a climb can be an adjustment to a position that fits, connects and enables further movement, and in this moment the embodied features of the talk showed, with Lorna looking more relaxed in terms of her posture and facial expressions. She too

commented that she felt more relaxed. As she shared this with me I took a deeper intake of breath, a relaxing sigh.

[Pause]

Helen: 'How would you like us to go on now?'

[Pause]

Lorna went on. 'I am really there for my son and how hard he is trying. I hadn't seen it as being thoughtful but maybe I am. We are both trying.'

Helen: 'Is that something you would like us to stay with for a while now?'

Lorna was nodding in agreement and looking brighter and interested.

Helen: 'And how shall we do that? I can ask more questions or we can reflect and take turns in listening and reflecting as we did before or ...'

Lorna guided me at this point.

Helen: 'Would it be ok for you to take me into that "being there" for your son and being thoughtful? What does it mean for you and your son and your relationship?'

Lorna went on. 'Simply being there means you are there without negative perceptions or judgements. I think professionals are quick to judge me sometimes.'

I considered, after this conversation with Lorna, how quick I am sometimes to ask questions and what meanings and ways forward are made of these and how they may be experienced. I was also aware of asking too much in one question, perhaps, and the importance of slowing things down and simplifying. I thought about how I might create a bridge or reach out more.

[Elongated pause]

I stayed with this pause just as a climber is poised in an active space of looking extra carefully and feeling sensitively for different holds that are not obvious. I was considering how much notice is required, how one might look and look again for what might be before my eyes (Wittgenstein, 1953).

Helen: 'How is this space Lorna? Is it ok or would you like me to say something here?'

Lorna: 'It's fine. It's good to have a bit of space to think. My head space gets so full at times.'

[Long pause]

In this pause I took on a gently nudging position. On a climb this might look like just offering spots that might be helpful footholds or handholds.

Helen: 'Is there a sense or image that helps you into that space of being there and thoughtful? At home with your son when you are together?'

Lorna: 'I'm thinking and picturing my son who is seventeen. I am stood there in the kitchen and I am looking at this big frame of a boy but he's not a boy I can't order him to do things or not do things. As a mother I want to do so much but you can't; there are some things you have to let go of as they grow up.'

Helen: 'And what does the letting go enable to happen?'

Lorna: 'It allows me to listen.'

This was one of the key things Lorna suggested that made a positive difference in her relationship with her son.

Lorna: 'Listening was something I didn't do before. I was constantly on his case but it wasn't until I started to listen that I realised this was the thing that was missing. Letting go and listening was something that helped, I think.'

All of a sudden 'listening' and letting go became the highest context. I thought about my own listening and I drew nearer and asked her: 'Who would you like most to see you with your son listening in this

way; what would you want them to see? How would it affect you in your relation if that person or persons could see you listening?’

Lorna was thinking and smiling as she thought. In our eye contact I was smiling back at Lorna and it brought forth a very rich response. Lorna talked about her grandparents and the aunt she was close to who, she said, would be ‘very proud of her’.

Helen: ‘What qualities would they be noticing in you with your son, Lorna?’

I was interested in the sense I had in this moment of my ‘being there’ with Lorna as a sense of being embodied and embedded. I was also feeling a sense of pride for Lorna as she started to shine when speaking of pride. I was positioning between observing and watching my own language and responses, listening to Lorna and being in this moment of Lorna absorbing appreciation from her family members as she spoke about them noticing her qualities. I was oscillating between multiple positions, of being fully absorbed and of being an observer (Hedges, 2005). I was also in a position of being a guardian of this appreciative space. I was asking questions and attending to the types of questions I was asking whilst being embodied and sensate. The appreciative questions had not worked initially and needed more layering or scaffolding at this point, but I was hooked into what was happening in this moment of being with Lorna.

With the frame of appreciation in place there was an opportunity to extend this space further, and Lorna’s response told me it was safe and ok to do so. I gently whispered this time.

Helen: ‘What else would your grandparents and aunt notice? Maybe things they hadn’t seen before that they might feed back to you?’

[Elongated pause]

This was a long pause, and I was concerned that I had asked too long a question as really there were three questions in my one utterance. As I indicated non-verbally and checked whether it would be helpful to rephrase it she responded.

Lorna: ‘I learned to stop all the things I wanted to launch into and look and listen. Yeah, they would see me looking and really paying attention. They would get a sense of how important it is to me. They would

tell me about the sort of listening I am doing. My aunt especially, she is a great listener. She would say “Lorna listening is the greatest support you are giving to your son right now”.’

Helen: ‘And what is this noticing saying to you Lorna about your qualities? What would you like to keep with you at these times?’

[Long pause]

I was gripped in this pause. I wanted to ask another question but remained poised within the pause. I was learning to be more relaxed in these relational spaces as I reflected on how Lorna was experiencing me listening. How was I embodying listening to show my support to her? I was asking myself the question that I had asked her, and gently whispered the same question again.

Lorna: ‘I am part of creating a turning point for my son. Being there, interested, tuned in and listening carefully to what he is saying and not to what I think he is saying. I will take with me staying sensitive to his mood, the tone of his voice, I’d sense if he was low. I would get a feel of what’s going on if I keep looking closely enough. I have look closely you see because Omar comes to talk when I am tied up with other things, he doesn’t want all eyes and attention on him. It’s hard to know what to do.’

[Pause]

I was curious about this pause as it was a sudden stop in Lorna talking and I noticed the look on Lorna’s face turn to what seemed like a perturbed expression. I went from a relaxed position back to guarding the appreciative space as I feared some self-doubt was creeping in for Lorna. I wanted to bring her back to an appreciative position to help her go on.

Helen: ‘You are giving a graphic picture here Lorna, take me into what happens in that space? You are there with Omar. You have your listening, thoughtful and sensitive tools with you in being there for him. Take me into what you do next?’

Lorna got back into her flow of movement in the talk. It was like a fellow climber having a bit of a wobbling moment that all climbers experience at different times, when all self-belief and confidence floods out momentarily and causes a physical and psychological sense of doubt. I was a fellow climber at this stage offering some encouragement to Lorna.

Lorna: 'I would be washing up when Omar suddenly joins me. He has chosen his time and if it's when I'm doing something that's for a reason. That's the challenge, to use that moment whenever it arises and whatever you're doing to tune in to be in it with him. He may talk it through with me or I may just pick up how nervous he is, or preoccupied he is. To notice all of that I have to look beyond what I see. That is what I need to do more of. Whatever the situation if I am tuned in I'd pick up on all that. I'd know that this really matters and nothing will break my attention away.'

[Pause]

The pause continued as I absorbed what this parent was saying.

Helen: 'I wonder ...'

[Pause]

In this pause I was wondering.

Helen: 'I wonder ...'

[Pause]

Helen: 'What do you draw on from noticing how you listen in such a tuned in, interested, careful way regardless of what is happening around you and despite the situation?'

Lorna: 'I went to quite a harsh school where the message was to respect your elders or else! It was unheard of to shout back but it was ok for them to shout at you. I got shouted at but it's no good for a parent to be going on all the time and in your son's face. Believe me, I did it for a long time and it doesn't work. It's a hard habit to break because everything is bubbling up inside you and you have to find a way of dealing with it in a way that doesn't come flooding out, it gets you nowhere. It doesn't work.'

Helen: 'And what was your learning from that not working?'

Lorna: 'I taught myself.'

Helen: 'You taught yourself?'

Lorna: 'To brace myself.'

[Pause]

Helen: 'To brace yourself? What are you meaning by "bracing"?''

Here I was hooked in and hovering, fascinated. I felt I was in a space of learning from Lorna who had done so much work and learning on herself so as to be helpful to her son and this will have required huge self-reflexivity. Lorna went on to describe 'bracing myself' with such clarity and eloquence. She was leading the climb at this stage and I was following in awe.

Lorna: 'I had to brace myself, let go, and trust the space.'

Helen: 'What is in that space of bracing, letting go and trusting the space?'

[Pause]

Helen: 'If there were other parents here how would you describe it to others? How would you teach parents "bracing myself", to let go and trust the space?'

Lorna: 'I'd get parents to practise lingering in that moment; to linger in that silent space. It's not as easy as you think. In fact it's the biggest challenge I would say as a parent. You don't want to fill it with your stuff but you have to wait a while until they have had a chance to get familiar with what you've asked them and how can they have the answers anyway. You'd certainly see someone being listened to, being heard. These things are hard to describe but anyone looking in would know, others would see a mother loving her son in her listening.'

Lorna moved further into a position of a guide and a teacher of others at this stage as she talked about holding her composure, bracing herself, as I was being poised in my learning of being in this dialogue with Lorna. Bracing and poise had connections in that both were about remaining open; I to Lorna and Lorna to her son as she described being open and trusting the space to respond to her son Omer's needs in



a way that she noticed was more helpful to him. This had gone unnoticed previously within the professional network. It made me wonder about my blind spots and how much I may be missing at times in terms of not ‘noticing’ as much as I could notice. How do I shed light the qualities of Lorna who listens so carefully, so full of care for her son? This listening was an embodied listening; she described listening with her whole body. In this moment there came over me a sense of connection to my own story, of stepping out of a comfort zone, of letting go of what I think I should do.

This transcript piece demonstrates the balance between having some solid grounding from our lived experiences and also more fluid ‘becoming’ through our learning through the lived experiences, in our conversations I learned about the different positions I was adopting around Lorna and in relation to Lorna’s different positions. I learned about holding tensions between different counter-positions, of being both grounded and looser and ‘poised’ in readiness to move between the two. Creating space and invitations to reflect on our being in this conversation provided different inquiry positions in our talk for both of us. We explored some of the points of our conversations that extended our thinking and understanding, and those points moved Lorna and me to a different place. This placed us both as active participants involved in co-inquiry in our dialogue and led to new ideas, thoughts and actions.

## **Reflection**

I reflected on how this particular climbing metaphor assisted me in reflecting on this conversation; how I layer, work with words and questions, and how my positioning is a way of constantly shifting and moving, looking for openings, guarding appreciative space and trying to enable the movement of others. The use of this particular metaphor in my reflections on this conversation extends my inquiry reach through unpacking the movement and the multiple positions through which we move. This became a collective space where we were inquiring into tiny details of different levels and strands of our conversation together. This moved from an internal reflection, an ‘I’ space of the practitioner, to a ‘we’ space, sharing together our noticing. This noticing and awareness created an opening to how we went on in our conversation. Relationally reflexive questions ensured this: How are we doing? How would you like us to go on/continue? How do we continue on together?

## **Summary**

Drawing on the metaphor directly and in my reflections has helped me to capture some of the lived experiences and a sense of being in conversation with Lorna in all of its embodied features. It illuminates features of my systemic positioning that I had not noticed before or had remained hidden in some way: the pause, for example, as a valuable resource, and systemic poise. The complexity is retained and kept alive in the interaction, the feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story (Bruner, 1986, p.143). Blind spots also come more clearly into view. The way I am using rock climbing is helping me negotiate through complexity, openness and the ever-changing aspects of conversation. I continue the next chapter focusing on another aspect of a climb, 'the flow' in my conversation with Mohamed.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **WORKING TOWARDS A ‘FLOW’: DIALOGUE WITH MOHAMED**

#### **Introduction to the Conversation with Mohamed: Beginning the Construction of ‘a Very Angry Young Man’**

This chapter details two conversations I had with Mohamed, a young person aged sixteen who was encouraged to see me because of concerns about ‘his anger’. His teacher’s first words to me were ‘he is a very angry young man’. These few words indicated a construction of anger as an abstract entity almost, and as a systemic practitioner they ignited my curiosity as to what the ‘actual moments of emotional feelings and displays’ (Harré and Gillet, 1994, p.146) looked like in their particular circumstances, context and the cultural location of anger. I wondered about the ‘stage setting’ and the rules and conventions for talking and acting that Mohamed was acting into and out of. This utterance certainly placed all sorts of expectations on Mohamed as possibly being a good actor of anger.

As I inquired about other aspects of Mohamed’s emotions in this school, such as what makes him show joy or enthusiasm, or his interests and abilities, there was little forthcoming initially, although contextual factors were to come to light over time. When I met Mohamed I knew nothing about his passions, likes, dislikes, culture and family or the situations that enabled him to shine. This attuned me to the blind spots, and what was not noticed about Mohamed, the vast areas that were being missed.

#### **Tracking the Stages of the Conversation over Two Sessions**

I tracked the different stages that led to a point of flow in the second session or, as Mohamed described it later, ‘we were in the zone’. Many processes occurred before this point of flow, and within a systemic approach I took up a position of curiosity towards these descriptions, wondering who is keeping the negative descriptions and narratives so firmly in place and how Mohamed would like others to be with and see him. As a systemic practitioner I am holding the contexts of social difference in mind in our conversations together, and I ‘watch like mad’ (Lang and McAdam, 1997) my responses. This affects my style, pace and language. I am also curious how Mohamed is making sense of the episodes of coming to

see me and what it is like for a young male of colour, whose family came from Somalia to England when he was a child, and what is like coming to see a white adult female adult professional. Cross-cultural assumptions and blind spots were to be kept closely in mind.

## **Preparations for the Activity of Climbing**

My preparation to meet Mohamed was akin to limbering up for a climb, reflexively stretching and extending as I need to be ready to create a dialogical space, open and flexible to be able to get to know a way around the conversational space with him. Given our differences and my potential blind spots, I am practising to become more attuned and aware of these, as well as the language I am using and the assumptions I am making. I am taking a position of ‘not knowing’ (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992). As a climber I am never certain of what is going to happen next and at the same time I come with a certain set of skills and experience, a ‘know-how’ that enables me to extend beyond my zone of comfort (Wilson, 2007). What creates the context for a trust in the space? I enter into these conversations with an ethos of uncertainty, respect for difference and an anticipation of ‘not knowing’ (Mason, 1993) and a poise to remain open in that space. As I reflected on meeting with Mohamed I pictured the constructions I was hearing around anger as encompassing him entirely, and I was ready for a position of challenging the assumptions that kept these constructions on too solid a ledge for Mohamed. I wondered what his dreams were, what he liked to do, and what the important features of significant relationships were for him.

## **Context**

A practice context to my meetings with Mohamed relates to my involvement in setting up collaborative working groups (reflective circles) with young people in two separate secondary schools in the neighbourhood. The wider context of this work was to encourage and facilitate multiple groups in different parts of the community and bring forth multiple voices within the neighbourhood, especially those voices that had not yet been heard, in the hope that people, including residents, young people and various professionals would feel confident, safe enough and empowered to come together at a later stage in one whole group in dialogue. I had used reflecting circles based on Andersen’s reflecting processes (Andersen, 1996), a framework detailed in Chapter 1.

Mohamed attended one of the schools where I had started a group, and some of his peers who had consented to be part of that group were already involved in this process. Mohamed was one of the young people invited to be part of these collaborative working groups, named by the young people themselves 'The Breakfast Club', with an agreed focus on having a voice about everyday concerns as young people and building a preferred picture of the community together. Through the dialogue with young people, that included unpacking and understanding concerns from multiple positions, of hearing about their talents and strengths and offering a space to voice future hopes and dreams about relationships and how they wanted to build on these in their neighbourhood, it was hoped to position these young people in different ways. It invited positions of being community members, as contributors and active agents, as young citizens. Although Mohamed had chosen not to be part of the group initially he agreed to meet with me individually for three sessions. This appeared to be more from a position of being persuaded by his teacher, and partly from his curiosity about what his friends were doing.

## **Mohamed**

Mohamed's name was given to me by his head of year, a white English male of senior years who thought it would be 'a good idea' for Mohamed to join the group as 'he has a lot to say for himself'. Mr Stevens went on to say that Mohamed's 'anger' was a big problem for staff in school. I welcomed the idea of Mohamed coming with 'a lot to say', and was curious about the language used to describe him given the limited additional information I was given that he was a sixteen-year-old pupil who was 'angry', 'a fighter', 'a troublemaker', 'a bad influence on younger pupils', and 'a ringleader'. Although I inquired into the context of these descriptions, they remained context-bare, and the language used suggested that anger, like many emotions, was seen as a 'concretized psychological state or objectivized thing' (Lutz, 1988, p.9) – in Western language it was seen as a thing. I wondered what the cultural specifics of anger and other emotions for Mohamed's were, the local, moral values learned within family, community, society and culture (Averill, 1982; Lutz, 1988; Averill, 1992; Harré and Gillet, 1994), how anger was being constructed within the school, and how different members of staff may have been positioned and influenced in terms of different local moral values they have learned.

I wondered about what was being missed, therefore; actions without their meaning in a context remain invisible for those outside the experience looking in. I wondered how the different stories and descriptions of Mohamed had been constructed, how language around Mohamed 'bewitches' those around him, generating problems, pictures, words and grammars that 'force themselves on us' (Wittgenstein, 1953),

and position and affect Mohamed in his relations and his options. It led me to question who holds the different descriptions that Mohamed could act into, and who could draw out aspects not yet seen. I was wondering what Mohamed's cultural heritage and family stories of resilience were, and where he saw himself in different contexts, as a son, brother, etc. How does he manage his emotions in other relationships, and what is the unique context in which he may feel anger and do something different? These were the types of limbering-up questions I was asking before I came face to face with Mohamed, and they were an aid in stretching my thinking and seeing to what degree others may shift their vantage point.

The Assistant Head Teacher said that Mohamed had 'brought the school into disrepute as his behaviour outside had been unacceptable and had led to police involvement.' Inquiring into Mohamed's likes and dislikes, who he shared with and confided in at school, I found that this was less known, and my systemic curiosity was orientated towards what I had not heard. I was driven towards inquiring into contexts of culture, ethnicity, and family experience. The response of not knowing was not one of potential opening but highlighted, instead, a cultural blind spot with the utterance, 'not sure, I think his family are from Eritrea or something'. My challenge to this was in the form of a question: 'What do you imagine might be important contexts for families from different cultural backgrounds?' I attempted to open space for reflection on culture as an organising context marker, among others, in people's lives, but this was not responded to and it therefore seemed important to visit in terms of what Mohamed might need regarding support and encouragement.

## **Changing Lenses**

A key preparation I made before my meeting with Mohamed was finding out who knew him best, who held alternative stories about him, about his interests, passions and strengths, and who could be a possible support. His learning mentor, Tony, emerged in my exploration as someone who knew Mohamed in a more holistic way, having worked with Mohamed over the course of the year. Tony offered a very different set of lenses to Mohamed, who was struggling with his behaviour when his father left the family home, and there was some suggestion of domestic violence. One of my questions to Tony was: 'How has Mohamed learned to do anger in the way he does?'

'That may be the instinctive message he was given,' Tony suggested.

Mohamed, now aged sixteen, came to England with his mother from Somalia when he was still a baby. I wondered about stories of migration and how his family made sense of that journey, what the journey in itself entailed and the resourceful stories held in Mohamed's family within that journey alone. As a systemic therapist this made me curious about Mohamed's family, about the stories he has of being a male within his family and stories of what it means to be male within his family, and possibly about culture and religion, too. I was also aware of possible stories of loss and displacement for Mohamed's family.

### **An Ethical and Appreciative Position**

I took an appreciative position towards Mohamed in the conversation I was in with Tony, maximising and bringing to light Mohamed's strengths and inquiring who most sees and appreciates his qualities. I was also exploring any potential support network around Mohamed in the school at this early stage. I heard how Mohamed's art teacher really appreciated his skill and talents in art, and he was a keen sportsman but is on a ban because of his 'angry outbursts'.

As I prepared to meet with Mohamed I was thinking through my intent and positioning in an appreciative way. There were ethical considerations here in terms of my role and position within the school, as I was not there 'to do therapy' as such. Thinking about my positioning (Harré and Langhove, 1999) was helpful in terms of assisting me to distinguish the context and the language, that is the linguistic and positional distinctions between the different activities and contexts I was in. I remained a professional and a trained systemic therapist regardless of context, and having a reflective conversation with a group in a school was different to being involved in a therapy session, although there were some obvious overlaps. Therefore clarity about my role, position and the distinction between my identities as both a systemic therapist/practitioner and a facilitator of a dialogue with individuals and groups had to be made explicit, although these were different contexts. This was voiced early on and made explicit to Mohamed also so that he could make an informed choice about whether he wanted to meet with me or not. He did agree, and we were given one of the smaller rooms in school to meet in. I identified my training, explaining that I was coming from a position of curiosity and asking lots of questions, and whenever I became aware of operating from a systemically informed method or technique I would name this in an accessible straightforward way. For example on one occasion I actively asked questions to perturb about some of the negative narratives that were around Mohamed and in our conversations, and mapped out unique outcomes as he spoke and drew these out to accentuate them as they had been hidden. At the same time I

encouraged Mohamed to guide me at times in his communication via his graffiti art, and I was curious about and interested in the richness of meanings that came from this process and his sharing and expression of his thoughts and views about issues that were important to him.

The first meeting I had with Mohamed was planned in a way to ensure he felt at ease and supported. He had the choice to invite a member of staff of his choice to that meeting. Mohamed chose Tony, his mentor, to be there for the first part with me. I thought about different ways of doing introductions and my plan was to do the introductions within an appreciative frame, asking Tony one thing that he appreciated about Mohamed and valued in his relationship as Mohamed's mentor and asking Mohamed the same question. The hope was that such statements would create a more appreciative space in the dialogue also and might serve as a useful icebreaker in meeting me for the first time.

### **My Internal Preparation: Self- and Relational Limbering up and Stretching before Meeting with Mohamed**

Being attuned to what may have become hidden and buried by many of the adults around Mohamed within the school community was important, especially as the view of Mohamed's behaviour had become very blinkered. I made a point of meeting with the members of the community who were also those who had made decisions about exclusion, including the Head of Year and Assistant Head Teacher, to ask questions they had not considered and about the detail and contexts of the behaviours, and the relationships that were helpful or less helpful. I was inviting different descriptions and different positions of noticing. How do we balance these descriptions and help Mohamed have a new set of descriptions to act into? Khan (2002) suggests that in therapy positioning recognises an interaction between two or more cultures, the therapist's and the client's, as 'a way to avoid exoticizing and marginalizing this work'. This was also a helpful orientation in preparation and paying attention to both the visible and invisible features of the interaction.

As part of my self-scrutiny I am curious about the different contextual factors that may be informing each of us moment by moment in this cross cultural space. I considered the 'individual and collective risk-taking' (Khan, 2002) that is involved in Mohamed's agreement even to come to the meeting with me, and the risk that it was important also for me to take in entering into this exploratory space with him.



The systemic questions in conversation with different members of the school community before meeting Mohamed were around who upheld Mohamed's interests in terms of his concerns, hopes, and interests, and an exploration of the significant contexts informing him, such as culture, preferred language and religion, family influences and the like. Tony the learning mentor was introduced to me. This was significant: he offered a different contribution to the narrative surrounding Mohamed, as he knew him better than anyone else. We began to enrich a picture of the relationships that were important to Mohamed and their informing contexts. This was all background systemic work, working with the system to create new relationships and stories, perspectives around the young person. This process itself had already started to have a beneficial effect in that some staff members had shifted their position to trying to be more understanding of Mohamed's difficulties, when Mohamed and I came to meet.

### **Encountering the Unexpected**

Things did not go according to plan in the first meeting. Mohamed had not arrived and I was informed that Tony was unable to attend with him. As I waited for Mohamed I heard an adult male shouting outside the door 'Stupid boy get to your class'. This prompted a lot of giggling amongst the pupils and more shouting. The teacher shouted even louder 'I told you get to your lessons now. Where should you be?' I was flooded with a sense of my own school experience and the prevailing idea at that time of teacher as a transmitter of knowledge whose authority is not to be questioned. I reflected on why I was so drawn to the writings and ideas of Freire (1972; 2001) and the discovery of his ideas as liberating, as he rejected this prevailing 'wisdom'. I was in my position of systemic curiosity, playing with the different ideas and alternative positions this teacher could be taking and how opportunities were being missed in positioning students more responsibly and as active responsible learners. It immediately drew attention for me to the space I wanted to create with Mohamed. It made me think of the distinctly different position that I was adopting. My position was actually very different, although this was a type of shared learning space. This involved a creation of new knowledge and a different type of learning space I wanted to create in our conversation with both parties being possessors of past knowledge, of different and equally valid sorts. This idea at this point for me became a hugely informing one as I thought about Mohamed arriving with his life experiences, his relationships with others and his previous schooling in hand.

The voice of a boy responding urgently to this teacher caught my ear as he appealed, 'But I didn't do anything, sir, I'm supposed to be here. Look, I've got a note.'

I imagined different footholds as a climber ensuring space for a fellow climber and finding ways of opening things up. The door burst open and dramatically the male teacher who had been doing the shouting outside the door said loudly:

Teacher: 'There you go. He's got a note to see you. "The fighter" is all yours. I hope you can sort out his anger.'

In response my immediate utterance as Mohamed entered was a thank you and a statement:

Helen: 'Mohamed can come in with interest, anger, questions or whatever he would like to invite with him to our talk, thank you.'

This statement distinguished the positions of this member of staff and me as being clearly different, and I wanted Mohamed to experience that difference. As Mohamed sat down he smiled, not looking particularly affected or bothered at all by the exchange, almost as though he knew the script. Once he had sat and taken a breath we introduced ourselves.

I grappled with my own immediate response and the conceptual complexities and assumptions I may have been bringing to this episode. I reflected also on the complete opposite experience I had also, of a teacher who imposed no rules and standards, and simply seemed not bothered at all, and this felt equally disrespectful. Mohamed knew Tony was not attending and was ok with this. I used the different types of relationships Mohamed had with Tony to other school staff as a possible starting point to invite him into curiosity also about this.

Helen: 'I was wondering how you see the difference in your relationship with Tony compared with this teacher?'

Mohamed: 'Tony, he's cool, he knows me. Mr Stevens doesn't know me, but he's fine. He does a lot of shouting but he's safe.'

Helen: 'Safe?'

Mohamed: 'Yeah he's fair you know. He shouts at everyone.'

Helen: 'How important is that, for school staff to be fair?'

Mohamed: 'Yeah it's important to be fair. Not all teachers are but the ones who are fair at least you know where you stand.'

My assumptions about this teacher and the relationship were unfounded, as actually Mohamed's direct experience from his authorised knowledge of him as a pupil was of him being fair. This was an important frame of reference for Mohamed in seeing how he is with other pupils in terms of fairness. I wondered how I might model fairness to Mohamed as he did not know me. I found myself joining with Mohamed's grammar and also setting a different context.

Helen: 'How would I know that you experience me as being fair in this conversation?'

[Pause]

'Is there a way that you can let me know if doesn't feel that way for you?'

[Pause]

'I am hoping we can have conversation and I appreciate your choice to meet with me?'

[Pause]

### **Making External Moves to Enter a Different Space**

There were a number of external moves on my part after this episode that were important because of the different context we were in. The entrance of Mohamed had been dictated by this member of staff and part of my response was to adjust and realign around what had happened. I liken this to a well-practised climber setting a new route defined by different kinds of moves. The pauses were short and significant and somehow set a pace like the decisive, deliberate, slow and steady moves I would make as a climber confident in the route I was setting out on. This was setting the context for the 'how' of the talk: it was consensual, respectful and appreciative, and Mohamed seemed relaxed in his responses. These early moves, the language I am using, my gestures, are creating a context for the talk. Pearce (1994) says that

the language and actions we use are influenced by what we perceive as the context in which we act. In this case the talking context had been perturbed and I found myself actively redefining the context and adjusting to create a distinctly different kind of space as I met with Mohamed for the first time. Just as a climber has to readjust to the conditions of rock, so too was I adjusting to the unfolding situation as Mohamed's teacher delivered him to the room. I thought also about how Mohamed would have experienced it.

In the first session I was setting out the context of our meeting as it was different to forming a young peoples' collaborative working group around inquiry, which would introduce the basic areas of discussion such as issues that were important to the young people themselves in their neighbourhood, being a neighbour and the type of relationships they would like to see. My questions were mainly concerned with and rooted in Mohamed's present situation and current relationships. The discussion about consent and choice and the transparency about the restriction in choice, given that clearly this was during school time, and the obvious constraints was pivotal. The school obviously has conventions and rules, and Mohamed put to me the counter-question 'so where's the choice?' Mohamed's ideas connected to the importance of gaining his consent, and respecting and highlighting that he had a choice to be in the session with me. It was important to clarify this at a very early stage to guide me and confirm whether it was ok to go on. I checked Mohamed understood this and sought to ensure it was happening in our conversations. Time was spent in that first session in responding to his questions and exploring issues that were important for him as a young person in the neighbourhood. Something that struck me in that first session was experiencing and hearing some of Mohamed's frustration. It came in response to a question I asked about Mohamed's views of having a voice and talking about issues that were important to him.

Mohamed: 'It'll never happen.'

Helen: 'Who is the person who you feel most heard by Mohamed? Who's around inside or out of school that listens to you most?'

Mohamed raised his voice, looking directly at me eye to eye. This was a point that seemed quite pivotal in this meeting.

Mohamed: 'No one knows what's going on. Adults just don't listen, they don't see, they don't get it. No one wants to listen to me.'

[Pause]

Mohamed looked down at his hands. In this pause it seemed important to rest here momentarily, to absorb what Mohamed was saying in the here and now. I noticed how I was moved by the passion, anger and pain, almost, with which Mohamed shouted out the words. The volume of this prompted a teacher in the adjacent room to knock on the door to check things were ok.

Mohamed's frustration in the way that he uttered these words was expressed through his whole body.

Helen: 'How would you like me to listen right now?'

[Pause]

Mohamed shrugged his shoulders, and I did some non-verbal gesturing to check with him whether he wanted to respond, but he did not take this up.

Helen: 'I have asked a lot of questions but I don't know how that is with you Mohamed, and how you are experiencing that. What would you like me to do? I can be silent and listen? Is it ok for me to say something here or ask another question I am not sure I may not get it right but can you help me?'

[Pause]

Having made this comment I was not sure what I was going to say next. There is no protocol or textbook for this so, as I would as a climber, I had to feel my way through here. What Mohamed was saying in a few words seemed of great significance and it felt important for me to stay with that, to try and understand. I became aware of something different I was sensing and noticing in my interaction with Mohamed, I was starting to see a young person who was quite isolated, vulnerable and frightened and as I began to notice this it came more into view in this moment. I wondered whether anyone else saw Mohamed's vulnerabilities and fears. I was wondering what other adults saw and what they did not see; the teacher who popped her head in the door for example, may have just seen and heard Mohamed's anger and nothing else.

Mohamed: 'No it's ok, carry on the questions are ok.'

Taking in the point at which Mohamed made eye contact I revisited this question in a slightly different manner responding in a quietly spoken manner.

Helen: ‘This seems to be important to you Mohamed, someone listening and being heard and I think you have important things to say? Who would you like most to hear?’

[Pause]

Again Mohamed raised his head and made eye contact. I changed what I was about to say in the moment from: ‘Perhaps this is an opportunity to have your say and to be heard’ to make it more personally connected.

Helen: ‘Who are the adults, family friends, school staff who might get it more? Can you help me with this Mohamed to get it?’

[Pause]

Mohamed: ‘No one.’

Helen: ‘What do you think Tony might say here if I asked him what is going on for Mohamed and who is understanding and hearing Mohamed most?’

Mohamed looked interested in that moment. There was a lot of movement in terms of my inner and outer considerations and it felt that we were moving through part of an emotional narrative landscape (Stern, 2004) and that the questions I was asking had the intention of trying to perturb Mohamed’s self-perception, expand his sense of choice and positioning. I hoped that he too in the process may feel heard, and at this point I was taking a lead position in the way I might do as a climber. In this case as a systemic practitioner I was taking the lead position through asking questions. The aim of these questions is to help create movement in positions and enable a ‘stance and position in relation to one’s surroundings’ so that ‘further unnoticed aspects become visible’ (Shotter, 1997, p.16). A change in our positions was to occur in my second session with Mohamed as I joined with Mohamed’s offer of his use of colour to help make sense of an angry episode. I detail this session and illuminate a point of opening that became available in this connection followed by Mohamed. It describes ‘a flow’ of new possibilities, influences and other perspectives and views becoming storied and coming brightly into view. Later in the chapter I describe in

this session Mohamed's connections and relationship to a changing emotion of anger (red) turning to calm with his association with the colour blue. I come to highlight this as a time when Mohamed moves into a lead position becoming aware of his own abilities.

At this moment in the dialogue in this session, however, Mohamed went into a self-deprecating narrative as he said:

Mohamed: 'Yeah Tony gets it a bit but there's nothing I can do.'

Mohamed went on to talk about fighting, and listed his attendance on a number of anger management and one-to-one programmes.

Mohamed: 'I am a fighter. People are scared of me because I'm bad. They stay well away. Teachers and police are always on my case.'

Helen: 'What do you mean?'

Mohamed: 'Fighting and me go together, end of!! I am always getting into trouble for it. I've even been arrested. I'm an offender, I've got a youth offender worker. He knows all my mates but they don't know what we get up to and what we have to deal with. No one can touch us when we are together.'

Helen: 'Who are the us?'

Mohamed: 'My mates.'

Helen: 'And is the fighting, is that something you want to change or ...?'

[Pause]

Mohamed: 'Er.'

[Pause]

Mohamed: 'Yeah I do but nothing's going to change.'

Helen: 'And what sets you aside as being different from your mates, Mohamed?'

[Pause]

Mohamed looked down, and as he was looking down I was thinking of trying to introduce some difference.

Helen: 'Is it that you want something to be different in relation to fighting?'

Mohamed: 'Look, I am the fighter in the school.'

Helen: 'Who would see you not only as the fighter in school? Who would see your other qualities? How about Tony, what qualities does he see, Mohamed, that others don't.'

### **Reflections on What is Happening in Dialogical Space: My Internal Dialogue and External Moves**

An indication of the totalising effect on the discourses surrounding Mohamed's behaviour is reflected in his utterances 'I am a fighter' and 'I'm an offender'. This appears to have become a dominant discourse. I felt a bubbling sensation in my stomach at the injustice of labelling in the presence of Mohamed. At only sixteen years of age he has been very firmly labelled by others and feels the real impact of it. There was a sense of the inevitable for Mohamed in his acceptance of the labels and I hypothesised that this was connected to other discourses such as power and patriarchy (Tomm, 1989). This ownership of the definition of himself highlights the contextual force obliging him to act in certain ways.

There are a mixture of dynamics going on in the talk and relationally, where I am in it in relation to Mohamed at different points and where he positions himself to me. Mohamed's talk of himself as 'bad' and that people 'are scared' and 'stay away' from him commands him to separate himself from others, especially those in authority it seems, and his language went onto revolve around 'us' and 'them', which seemed to be indicative of this separation. On the other hand, there was a strong identity with Mohamed's group of peers, 'us', who I checked out with Mohamed, and 'we'. 'No one can touch us', may indicate that group membership equals power and this is significant for a group of young people who may



experience being excluded and powerless in a societal context. Mohamed moved from the 'me', classing all adults as 'them' initially, and he sees the 'them' as not listening and 'not getting it'. I found my questions were inviting Mohamed to take up a different subject position in respect of individuals outside the group. However, he rejected the invitation without acknowledgement and reiterated that he was 'the fighter in the school'. If Mohamed was seen as 'a fighter' within his peer group I wondered how that placed him and what this position afforded him. There was also a responsibility for those engaging with him, including me, for thinking about the implications of a change in this role and position without adjustments and a change in positioning in other parts of the system. Consideration from all Mohamed's teachers, for example, about the new roles and positions Mohamed might act into and feel valued in, was an area to be explored with the school staff.

In terms of this positioning dance between Mohamed and myself around language, I attempted to offer more relational awareness in some of my questions to him, yet there was a real pull that I felt as palpable, as many of his statements seemed to indicate that his highest context in terms of his subject position was group identity and a simple opposition between the group and the rest of world.

The notion of radical listening (Weingarten, 1997) was important in my position as I attempted to set out a different route for Mohamed in the talk as well as for myself as an inquirer into my own practice. Having an attentive ear and listening out for alternative stories, thinking ahead to how some of the more fixed stories might become dislodged in the following conversations, were all aspects of my inner dialogue and set forth as questions, as moves in the conversation. Checking with Mohamed where and how he was with my questions were an attempt to bring the internal relational to an outward relational move.

Helen: 'What is are the aspects of fighting that become attached to you and what are the aspects of fighting that don't attach at all?'

Mohamed: 'What do you mean?'

Helen: 'I suppose I mean can you shrug fighting off sometimes and do something different?'

There were also times when I invited a slight twist in a question with the intention of offering Mohamed another position on fighting in order to dislodge what seemed to have become a fairly fixed view for him

and others. By thinking about his relationship to fighting I was hoping to introduce Mohamed to an alternative relationship to the fighting, opening more options to him to move around.

At this stage, towards the end of our first meeting, Tony joined us. He was very apologetic as he had been held up. What was planned for the beginning of the session still seemed relevant and to fit as an ending of the session. I was able to ask Tony directly what he appreciated about Mohamed and his qualities and I added the question in the light of the dialogue that had gone before: what sets him out as different to his group of peers? This prompted Tony to list a number of Mohamed's qualities, as a leader, as a social person, and as caring and protective of his younger brother. He also said that his artwork was fantastic.

I drew on what Tony added with further questions: 'And what would his brother say if he was here?'

In response to what his art teacher would say about his qualities, Tony offered feedback about Mohamed's 'flair' and 'talent' and also about how he 'concentrated and worked so hard in those classes', describing his work as 'alive with colour'.

Invited into the room at this point were not just Tony's but other valuable voices that became a real leverage to create some difference to Mohamed's fixed narrative.

An important part of the process of having Tony join also was to collaborate with Mohamed about what he wanted to share with him and not make assumptions. I moved swiftly in the moment of almost giving feedback in the process of our session, stopping myself in my tracks to offer this space to Mohamed to say as little or as much as he wanted to.

## **Second Meeting with Mohamed**

In the time between this and the previous session with Mohamed I had invited different conversations, enlisting Tony the learning mentor as Mohamed's champion who was going to rally around the staff room looking for other supportive staff members for Mohamed. Tony also had a good relationship with Mohamed's mother and a network began to widen that recognised him as a vulnerable young person who needed extra support and encouragement at this time. My orientating question during this period was: 'Who can be a resource to Mohamed right now around these issues?' I felt my position was more like a campaigner on Mohamed's behalf, recruiting allies and support. This was all invisible to Mohamed, but

he became aware of more people showing an interest in him. This was a pivotal time as his position in school was so tenuous and he was close to being excluded. I wondered how Mohamed's relationship with Tony could be drawn upon more in our meetings, as Tony was a consistent adult male figure Mohamed had a good relationship with, and he appreciated Mohamed. This was a session that I was planning, an appreciation session and a space for Mohamed to be heard and have an interested listening audience.

Tony agreed to link up at the end of every conversation Mohamed and I had (and to join when he could) to create a useful link back with someone who knew him best and could support him in school.

## **Second Dialogue with Mohamed**

Mohamed came into this session immediately offering the topic of fighting as a starting point of focus to our conversation.

Helen: 'Good to see you. Mohamed How are you Mohamed?'

Mohamed: 'I dunno, I got excluded last week for a big fight. I just went mad, they made me lose my rag, I've got no control have I? They just made me see red.'

Helen: 'How do you mean that?'

Mohamed: 'Just their whole way, they came up to me like they were waiting to catch me out and they're just out to get me, there's nothing I can do and little comments like about my family, my mum and I just go mad, I can't control it and they know it.'

Whilst I was in a systemic, almost automatic, mode of trying to create and open up a possibility of creating a shift in the dominant narrative of fighting I overlooked what was going on in this interaction and, indeed, what was going on for me. My questions continued uncoordinated in the space I occupied with Mohamed, however.

Helen: 'And what about the people, say, teachers, what would they see you being good at?'

Mohamed: 'They don't know anything. I just get into fights at school and the teachers can't control me, no one can. I just get into trouble but they can't tell us what to do when we are not in school.'

Helen: 'How would you like me to be hearing you at the moment Mohamed? Can I ask you something that might take you away a bit from fighting and getting into trouble?'

Mohamed: 'I am going to get excluded. What is the point? I am going to mess up anyway. I just lost it in my last class and the teacher said that's it.'

I noticed Mohamed physically becoming more tense, his breathing was becoming shallower and he was talking quickly. I became aware of my own breaths, and started to breath more slowly and deeply.

### **Reflections on What is Happening in Dialogical Space: My Internal Dialogue and Outer Moves**

I wondered about the relationship to control, power, and responsibility within a number of different contexts, including getting into fights at school, being excluded, and getting into trouble with the police. I thought about how Mohamed experienced my questions and how at times they were disconnecting with Mohamed and his experience, as was indicated by the language he seemed to be getting drawn back into. This was almost passive and fatalistic, seeing events as simply happening. This instance shows a tendency to reject the possibility of controlling events or taking responsibility for them. His self-talk is characterised by phrases such as 'it just happens' and 'there's nothing I can do'.

I reflected on my brother's experiences at Mohamed's age as a sixteen-year-old expected to resolve things through fighting, experience that was reinforced by his peers; the male narrative in the family at that time, particularly of boys fighting to protect family honour, was one way young males were encouraged to deal themselves with taunts and bullying. Making connections to other possible and invisible contexts such as stories from different cultures, class, societal and political backgrounds, became dominant reflections for me as I thought about my own and family culture and the types of verbal and non-verbal impositions that position boys with an overriding obligation to fight. This may have been further reinforced by a socio-political context and impacted upon by generational stories of sons learning from their fathers to fight in response to political and societal experiences of injustice and discrimination.

I imagined at this point that this could be my brother as a fifteen-year-old talking here. Mohamed specifically stated in respect of his temper 'I can't control it'. The word 'just' is used in many contexts and seems to suggest a perceived lack of meaning. I was wondering what was going on for Mohamed in his internalised discourse (Tomm, 1989) that seemed to suggest that any attempt to control is pointless, since outside forces are stronger; 'they made me lose my rag'.

I was feeling quite hopeless and overwhelmed at this point. In terms of Coordinated Management of Meaning (Cronen and Pearce, 1985) getting into trouble at school and being arrested by the police out of school were significant events, yet the highest context which seemed to emerge for Mohamed was his life-script and the role he saw for himself as protecting the family name, as I imagined also my brother would have done at his age. This overlaps also into other contexts such as age, gender and race/culture. The experiences of Mohamed as a young male of African heritage with adults, especially those who are in authority, appears to be represented by language such as 'it's my word against theirs'. My moves were to introduce as much choice as possible in our talk, especially as Mohamed talked as though he had no choice and spoke from a position of being someone who was acted upon. Again the word 'just', especially in relation to the loss of control in an environment of authority, seemed pertinent here. It constantly brings into view for me how Mohamed was relating to experiencing what I was asking him and my position. I was somewhat lost when I asked:

Helen: 'How would you like me to be hearing you at the moment Mohamed? Can I ask you something that might take you away a bit from fighting and getting into trouble?'

As I asked this question my intention was to create a movement to a different place. There was a sense of anticipation as Mohamed looked surprised but in an interested way. I noticed his breathing was still very light and shallow, though, and felt this was the most important thing to attend to.

Helen: 'Ok, Mohamed I really want you to take some time now, Mohamed. Maybe free your mind from what's going on right now at the moment. Take a deep breath.'

I was at this point checking out the possibility of moving with Mohamed into a different position. His talking sounded almost like a script he had been in time and time again. I was inviting Mohamed to a place that took him to a different vantage point, and therefore I was more deliberate at this point. I became aware of pacing my question at this moment, slowing it down, and I became aware of taking a deep breath in and a slow deliberate breath out before I asked a question, intending somehow to slow

Mohamed down and to demonstrate myself breathing in a deliberate way as a guide to help him, one that he could join. There was a long pause before I asked the question to give Mohamed time to regain a steady breathing pace and until he felt more relaxed, and there was a lot of checking out with him at this stage. As a climber this would be akin to my breathing preparation before taking a decisive move. There is a controlled adrenalin sometimes in the build-up process as I think of timing and pace and this was happening in the moment of asking what is actually quite an ordinary question; perhaps this became more important in that I was trying to shift Mohamed and myself over to another vantage point from which to view things. I was clearly the lead climber here in climbing terms and being attentive to my own moves and to footholds and handholds for my fellow climber also. Systemically I am using all the gear I have and thinking of adapting questions and the like.

Helen: 'Can you think of a time when you managed not to get into a fight or fought less somehow?'

[Pause]

Helen: 'Can you think of a time that you felt really proud about that. Let's take a few moments to think.'

[Pause]

In this pause I was attentive to Mohamed in terms of what he was communicating in his non-verbal expression. I could see that he was actively thinking and engaged in thinking and did not need any further prompting.

Mohamed: 'I only had a couple of fights with a couple of people when I was away with the school at Easter. It was a year group trip to Wales that was with a couple of boys in my year that came over with us.'

Helen: 'So tell me about how you managed to just have a couple of fights, tell me about one time that you managed to avoid getting into a fight or resisted it?'

I was in a space of wanting to explore a 'unique outcome' (Epston and White, 1992) for Mohamed in relation to fighting, and to unpack an episode with him that could have brought forth qualities and strengths in his choices and decisions that may have been hidden.

Mohamed: 'Me and my mates. There was a white boy a bit older; he was fifteen then; and a black boy who I didn't really know but they didn't like me and for no reason I made a catapult and shot it in their room and they went ape, saying it nearly hit them. Then they were going to the teacher and said they'd call my mother and the boys started calling her names and ...'

[Pause]

I could see Mohamed was animated and getting quite worked up by the memory of this and I wondered what Mohamed was communicating to me about protecting the honour of his family.

Helen: 'Are you ok Mohamed? I can see it is something that may still be affecting you in remembering this.'

Mohamed was breathing heavier and faster.

Helen: 'Are you ok to go on or do you need anything?'

Mohamed: 'Yeah ...'

[Pause]

Mohamed: 'You see I'll take it and take it and then I'll explode. I'll only see red, red and nothing else. I lose control completely and no one can stop me. I can't stop myself.'

[Pause]

Helen: 'And what happens next?'

Mohamed: 'I lash out. I see red and I lose control. I can hurt someone.'

Helen: 'It sounds quite scary for you to be in red, not feeling in control and for others too who could get hurt?'

Mohamed nods and looks down.

[Pause]

This seemed a pivotal point and the highest context informing me at this point was Mohamed's responsibility to respond to his sense of losing control. His talk speeded up and he seemed quite alarmed by his loss of control at the stage of seeing red. Mohamed had made such a powerful connection to a visual image of colour, my systemic intuition was to join with him in colour, to walk alongside him in this connection and explore ways with him of bringing down his sense of fear and empower him to gain control. I was still at this stage feeling the 'red' as a possible hold and I checked that out with him.

Helen: 'Is it ok if we stay here with seeing red for a moment Mohamed? To explore it together?'

Mohamed: 'Ok.'

Mohamed looked up, we made eye contact with each other and I was doing a lot of ensuring, non-verbally as well as with the verbal 'ok', that there was consent to go on as Mohamed was nodding.

Helen: 'We'll take it slowly and step by step and see how we go.'

I had the sensation of this being a 'grab factor' or hook point with Mohamed's offering of 'seeing red', coupled with perhaps my knowledge that he had a passion for art and grasp of colour, that this could allow an exploration of possibilities and resource-finding. There was a look of interest and relief as Mohamed could see that I was joining him in this journey. The moment we both entered into that colourful space there is a sudden, click, connection and flow.

### **The Hook Factor: Point of Connection Leading to Flow**

Helen: 'Could you go into a bit more detail about seeing red? What are you seeing, hearing, feeling? Are there any smells?'

Mohamed: 'No, it's I am surrounded in red, I become red, I see red.'

Helen: 'Are there any other colours around before or after seeing red?'



Mohamed: 'There are a sort of haze of different colours that are a bit of a mix.'

[Pause]

This was quite a long pause, and in this moment there was a different sense and feel within the dialogue, marking a distinct point of connection with Mohamed in the process of the talk. This was akin to a climber feeling a revelatory hold. What follows are a sequence of coordinated effortless flow moves as the conversation unfolds. In climbing terms this solid hold provides energy, encouragement and momentum for some big bold and safe movement together.

Helen: 'Tell me about that mix of colour? Where are you and what are you doing in relation to others in that mix?'

Mohamed: 'I sort of try to give them warning, I said my mum will smack you. But then he called my mum a bitch and then Rich tried to calm me down. I can only hold so much; everyone knows I've got no control. I picked up a chopper and Rich tried to stop me. You see when I get angry I ...'

[Pause]

Mohamed: 'I don't want to get angry but I get so angry they can't calm me down.'

Entering into the detail of this episode through a different lens and joining Mohamed's grammar of colour seemed to liberate and generate a different freedom of positioning around the issue of fighting for Mohamed and, indeed, for me as I went with the flow and exploration around this. The idea of language as creative (McNamee and Gergan, 1992; Burr, 1995) and dynamic really came alive in this moment, and attending to and joining with the language being used by Mohamed in this moment to describe the episode for him in the world around us also helped to shape and create different meanings in the process.

Helen: 'So what calmed you in that situation?'

Mohamed: 'I suppose the fact that Rich was there, that calmed things.'

Helen: 'And what colour do you link with this calming?'

Mohamed: [Pause] ‘Er, I, I’d say it was [scrunching his face] bluey-pink.’

[Pause]

In this pause I was struck by the aesthetic quality of what was happening in the talk. This was setting forth something different for both of us. I was curious about where I was finding myself in this dialogue as an artist also, and I wondered whether Mohamed’s inside experience and passion with painting and colour was also something that created a connection in what was feeling like a dialogical flow. Other thoughts I played with in this pause, as we both absorbed the colour and the emerging meaning of colour, was the power of stepping into a metaphor that had some personal meaning for Mohamed and the scope of where that can lead.

Helen: ‘So when you were in bluey-pink how did you manage to allow Rich to calm things down?’

Mohamed: ‘I listened to him I guess.’

Helen: ‘How did you manage to listen Mohamed? What difference did that make to what were you hearing when you listened to him?’

Mohamed: ‘I heard the words “It’s not worth it Mohamed. It’s not worth it”.’

Helen: ‘Any thing else?’

Mohamed: ‘I heard “You don’t want to hurt anyone”, but even after this, when it had all calmed down, we all went back to our rooms. But the two boys had fallen asleep in the dorm and I thought I’ll leave them to sleep. I didn’t wake them and I fell asleep on the bunk. The next day the bedroom door got locked by mistake and the black boy just kept giving me dirty looks. He just kept it going and going and I started moving into the red.’

Helen: ‘So what colour were you in at that stage, just before you felt yourself moving into the red?’

Mohamed: ‘Purple I think ...’

[Pause]

Mohamed: 'Yeah, purple. I grabbed his face and said, "Stop looking at me, I'll get angry." He told me I was going mad like my mum and that was just it. I held him by the neck and started squeezing but somehow I kept my cool.'

Helen: 'So even though you started moving into the red you managed to keep your cool. I wonder what colour keeping your cool is?'

Mohamed: 'Keeping my cool is definitely blue.'

Helen: 'How come "definitely"?'

Mohamed: 'Blue's my favourite colour.'

[Pause]

This actual occurrence could not be anticipated, and this episode felt creative in its highest sense. There was no script to this and it created its own drama as the dialogue unfolded, dialogue which was grippingly intense and intrinsically artistic. It seemed like being in dynamic motion, a shared voyage, as Stern (2004) describes. In climbing terms there was a move and flow of two climbers in coordination with the moves of the other and in the movement together passing 'through an emotional narrative landscape with its hills and valleys of vitality affects, along its river of intentionality (which runs throughout) and over its peak of dramatic crisis' (Stern, 2004, p.174). There was an aesthetic in the movement and production of meaning emerging; it opened possibilities and gave a sense of great freedom in the dialogue between Mohamed and me as the possibilities kept expanding. The dialogue itself became self- and relationally creative.

Helen: 'So is that something you like doing, keeping your cool?'

Mohamed: 'Er ... I [pause] I haven't thought about it but, er, yeah, yeah I do.'

Helen: 'Can I just ask you at this stage Mohamed, are you ok about talking in this way? Do you want to just say how you are finding it so far?'

Mohamed: 'No, it's ok, really, it's cool.'

Helen: 'That's interesting. I wonder are there any connections between you describing keeping your cool and how you describe this as "cool"?''

Mohamed: 'Er, I dunno.'

Helen: 'I'm curious about when you describe being in the blue and keeping your cool, what were you saying to yourself and what were you doing?'

Mohamed: 'I started to say to myself "Calm down", I was looking at this girl and she was thinking that I was going to go mad and I could have but I didn't. I was wanting to punch him so bad but I was saying to myself, "I'm bigger than he is and he's smaller than me". I let go of his neck then.'

Helen: 'Who would have been most proud of you seeing how you managed to calm yourself down and remain in the blue?'

Mohamed: 'My mum maybe, she says as I've got older I've got worse, she'd say no one can calm me down. I can only hold so much, I'll say stop now and if I cry I get really mad and see red.'

Helen: 'Who else?'

Mohamed: 'Tony. He'd be proud.'

Helen: 'And what colour are you in then Mohamed when you see the red ahead? What colour are you in at that moment?'

Mohamed: [Pause] 'Er, [pause] purple, I'd say I was in purple.'

Helen: 'And what's happening in purple?'

Mohamed: 'Even when I'm in purple I'm still holding things together but I'm angry inside but controlling it. It's just in that red that I lose it.'

## **Reflection**

My positioning in meeting Mohamed was about keeping open and being poised to notice opportunities. I was occupied by different biases at different stages such as my bodily jarring towards what I considered were the authoritarian monological actions of the teacher in the first session who ‘delivered’ Mohamed to me; this was informed by what I saw as the dangers of this type of language and position, in perpetuating the narrative of a young person without agency, of quelling the natural curiosity and freedom of this student Mohamed. I was entering this space with a position and my assumptions, and operating from a position of respect for the autonomy and dignity of Mohamed as the highest context and an ethical imperative. I had not considered the many ways of doing respect and in the process of questioning my assumptions in response to Mohamed’s feedback around this I was reminded of my blind spots. It was a process of self- and relational reflexivity: asking myself and Mohamed how he was in the relationship, seeking permission to go on with different questions and exploring together the different meanings meant sustaining a vigilance to the process of choice and collaboration, especially as Mohamed felt positioned in other contexts without a voice and without choices.

## **Harnessing the Change: Enlisting the Team around Mohamed**

The whole process of the way Mohamed had been doing anger, the undoing of that and exploring who was around in Mohamed’s network to help him undo or redo anger in a different way, a way that kept him, in his words, ‘in the driving seat’ was the follow-up to this work. I suggested a follow-up reflective circle with key members of staff and Mohamed to enlist a team around Mohamed to help support him. Mohamed managed to find his voice also to offer feedback on a strategy that the school kept using, which involved giving him a red card as a message he needed time out, was in this context not helpful as it kept him in the red and in anger. Mohamed suggested a blue card would be better for him as it would remind him to take deep breaths, and as a group we came up with other ideas, guided by Mohamed, as to what would be most helpful to help bring him to a calm place.

## **‘Don’t Think but Look’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.66)**

Taking up a position of action in our interactions meant I was attending to the act of looking and feeling a way around the conversational space with Mohamed as opposed to thinking. This position led me to pay

attention to micro-responses, such as Mohamed's breathing in our second session, and this attention helped him regain a steadiness in his breathing. As a climber I am aware of what is going on in front of me and around me, with a constant vigilance as essential in practice as it is in climbing a rock face with others.

The connection that led to 'being in the flow', as I described, and for Mohamed, 'being in the zone', in the second meeting was a process of responding, connecting to the poetics invited by Mohamed in 'seeing red', with an opportunity for unsettling the ordinary and creating the imaginary (Gergen, 2008) that invited a transcendence and a different vantage point from which to dislodge a dominant narrative. The moment of connection around colour, joining Mohamed's image and metaphor of colour, also involved some letting go and risk-taking on both our parts as I let go of a route I was trying to lead on to join and maximise the flow and possibilities in the conversation. There was something quite dramatic within this episode that highlighted the shared nature of the event and was fascinating in its realisation of an ideal potentiality of the human being, in this case Mohamed and I, as we are both active participants, players, climbers.

Attending to the detail of interaction, the effect of my questions, the quality of listening to potential for openings in the conversation to create a difference and a readiness to go with the flow with him, created a potential shift to a different vantage point for Mohamed, highlighting new abilities that had remained hidden in terms of his self-narrative. A new narrative for Mohamed was being created for him as a young person 'holding it together', of being 'in control', a young person who can exercise choice and with agency.

## **Summary**

This chapter has explored invisible internal dialogue and outward moves in the space between the dialogue with Mohamed, and I continue with this level of detail in the next two chapters. Ways of reflexively preparing for conversations whilst being aware of the multiple contexts informing us both, and how that impacts relationally on how we go on is a key consideration. I am all the time as a systemic practitioner working to maximise a poise, a readiness, an awareness and a sensitivity to issues of social difference in the interactional space. An embodied reflexive awareness and sensitivity creates the conditions for connection points and an astuteness to spot potentials for openings, and is a very active space. Connecting to Mohamed's metaphor extended the relational as the meaning of the colour

constructed between us became a vehicle for coherence via the experience of the dialogue itself. Mohamed came out, as I did, with new understandings. I gained understanding using the primary resources of the imagination through metaphor. This in turn made it possible to ‘give experience new meaning and to create new realities’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.228).

The newness and novelty portrayed including the hook factor and the connection in the moment, that required a letting go so as to catch the momentum of the movement as we both moved with the flow following a course together. This characterises a sensation of coordination in the relationship with other living, moving beings, fellow climbers as they respond in their unique ways to the contours, different features of the rock and the external conditions they are met with.

I stay with this theme of movement through the conversational space in the following two chapters, sequencing moves and exploring new resources that come to light for those involved, including my learning, which I reflect on in the final chapter.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **SEQUENCING MOVES**

#### **Embodied Reflexive Sequencing Moves in a Multi-Agency Network Meeting**

In this and the following chapter I build on an exploration of systemic positioning through the use of the metaphor of rock climbing with an embodied reflexive orientation to processes. The dialogue involves a conversation with a group of professionals across different service groups including youth justice, social services, youth and community, education, housing and the police. Like climbers together, the moves of one impact on the moves of the other, there is reciprocity within the process, an ebb and flow of movement and still points, of balance and imbalance. In tension or in flow, each climber is connected on a climb, positioning and repositioning through the movement of other and self. Slight shifts in position from one climber can enable a difference and create new openings for others. This may not be cognitively transparent but is a felt sense or what Stern calls an implicit knowing (2004, p.113). Similarly in practice there is reciprocal movement: I am experiencing embodied senses as I listen, am stirred or am moved at times by the words of others. This is difficult to put into words but is experienced in an embodied way, touches me and connects with me personally.

‘We touch each other and ourselves with expressions and the words we speak move both ourselves and others to different positions’ (Fredman, 2007, p.49).

Apparent in each of the dialogical excerpts and vignettes presented in the previous chapters has been a process of positioning within an ethos of being present and engaged as a movement through multiple positions has evolved together. In the meeting with the professional network, however, there is an initial professional position that seems to be more distancing within the group from the issues being raised. This is indicated by the language used. I examine my embodied responses, positioning around this language as I too feel I am positioning to draw away from the language. Through the course of the sequences I explore the different positions to facilitate a more personal connection.



## Sequencing Moves in the Activity of Climbing and Practice

Multiple micro- and macro-moves on a climb can be seen as coming together as sequences with other climbers in the movement and activity of the climb itself. Multiple invisible and visible processes are in play as moves are being made together: as one climber shifts to move another is feeling that same to movement through the tension or slack of the rope, adjusting the rope enable and maximise movement for the other. There is much activity in this process, both visible and invisible, as each climber draws upon the lived experiences from different climbs and is informed by other spheres and contexts within direct lived experience, as the space is negotiated together. This negotiating of relational space fits for me with the notion of dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984; 1986) and the perception of life as dialogic; human understanding finding its form in between people in communication – the dialogical space.

Explored in this chapter is a professional network meeting, and through an embodied reflexive lens I examine the moves I am making in the dynamic of conversation and how I am positioning and repositioning to enable dialogue. As a systemic practitioner I keep in constant focus the relational processes within conversations, episodes and utterances. I attempt to remain curious about how local, historical and community-based understandings are being constructed in the multiple moves with others. An ethos is being shaped in the process of how we enter a conversation, and systemically I am paying attention not only to what is happening in the interaction – the space between us – but also to what I am bringing to the conversational space and the influences that close me down or enable my going on with others. This is similar to the multiple processes I attend to as a climber, the external circumstances, the conditions that change the landscape, the detail of the immediate rock face, and I also pay constant attention to those I am climbing with as we become relationally responsible. A constant alertness is called for, therefore, as I position and reposition, as I look and look again for openings and connections.

‘Attention’ is a derivation from the Latin *attendere* that actually means ‘to stretch forward’. This is an embodied feature inherent in the act of climbing and included within this sequence as an act in practice, where I examine stretching forward in the detail of the interaction. The dialogue is explored through a set of sequences focusing on what is going on in my internal dialogue whilst in dialogical process with others as I respond in external moves. Tuning my immediate attention to my internal dialogue in the initial sequence of losing my balance following an utterance, I reflect on my response in the moment to the specific language being used – ‘anti-social behaviour’ – and my being introduced as an ‘expert professional’. I explore what it is that creates ongoing movement as I reposition; tuning in as I become

aware of an embodied effect as I try to resist the temptation not to react or understand too fast, examining and tuning out to attend to the outer moves I have to make in response. The stretch forward happens within this process and the movements and shifts continue within the dialogue. The process of dialogue is packed full of unfolding invisible factors and is explored with an embodied reflexive use of the metaphor.

## **Internal Dialogue and External Moves**

I am paying attention to the influences that become apparent in my internal dialogue and the multiple processes of being in interaction with others as I attend to my responses to others; the visible outer moves manifest as invitations to shift position, the modelling of my own shifting of position, through utterances, questions as ‘moves’, invitations for dialogue. Sometimes I am guiding and creating a context and parameters for listening and talking when it is apparent that people need safety in that space and this, too, is all part of the process of my paying attention. The sequence moves onto letting go, as with the group of professionals we consider what adults need to let go of to enable young people to gain a voice. I model movements to maximise and encourage fellow climbers to extend their abilities, which means at times moving out of my comfort zone (Wilson, 2007) and I work through the internal dilemmas and challenges which might be analogous to ‘crux points’ in climbing, those points in conversation that create the greatest challenge. These points will vary from individual to individual.

## **‘Crux’ Points**

‘Crux’ is a climbing term, one that fits with my experience as a climber and systemic practitioner as it covers encountering the complexity and challenging points and features on the rock face. Similarly, as I enter into different community dialogues I encounter different crux points and draw upon a range of resources, experience and skills as I shift and move into different, sometimes less familiar, positions. I try out different moves as I respond to the moves of other active agents encountering crux points. I am also drawing on feedback from; the environment, the process, the response of others, an assessment of what is working and what fits within that particular aspect of the climb.

## **The Focus of the Sequences**

- Losing balance

- Regaining balance: disposition to reposition
- Stretching forward
- Inviting different positions
- Reflection
- Illuminating blind spots: bringing issues of social difference into view
- Reaching out, making a connection
- Letting go of the 'shoulds' about knowing
- Entering into and exploring metaphor: exploring bodily knowing
- Learning and action from the conversation
- Moving on together: the direction this took in action

The sequences are a way of slowing things down and therefore there is an element of impeding the normal flow in order to make sense of things and co-create new meanings. This is similar to my systemic practice as it is to climbing. I have slowed down the pace in writing also to enter different parts of the sequence, including focusing in on different episodes. Being off-balance is illustrated in my internal dialogue in response to an utterance, and other parts of the sequence show my attempts to stretch out and create different person positioning with the questions I am asking, to reach out to make new connections and to let go of knowing and assumptions. The talk becomes more personal as more personal language such as a personal 'impasse' is described by one of the group and I connect this also to my initial felt sense in the first part of the meeting. I show my working through of this process and how I facilitated the movement of others. All this has the intention of facilitating connections in relationships within the social activity of being in conversation, and the multiple moves of the collective – of 'producing and becoming' (Holzman, 2009) – is explored through these sequence moves. In my practice I am hoping to achieve coordinated actions with others, privileging the making of 'decisions in cooperative interchange with others' (McNamee, 1994).

### **First Part of the Sequence: Losing Balance in the Pull of 'Problem Talk'**

The first part of this sequence is set in the context of first meetings with the multi-agency professional group and adults, and then with residents together. The neighbourhood context of conversations across the different groups and from different first meetings is visually depicted with a snapshot Atomic model image (Pearce, 1994) around a collection of the speech utterances coming from the adult group at the

beginning stages of dialogue on the broad issue of ‘anti-social behaviour’. I include a similar snapshot around what young people are saying and, also, a snapshot image of my self-reflexive dialogue which locates where I am at different times in the dialogue, while the struggles within a contextual framework of CMM shows the contextual factors informing me in my inner dialogue and outward moves. Presented last, these are a way of freezing the sequence, movement and aspects of the dialogue in order to examine it more closely.

## **Context to the meeting**

The context for this section was being invited to a multi-agency network meeting made up of a mixed group of managers and other professionals. The meeting was convened to address an issue that had generated significant worry; it had been described as a ‘serious problem of anti-social behaviour’ that had escalated and had reached a point where, according to the group, it had ‘hit a crisis point in the neighbourhood’. I was invited to the conversational group as a new member in my capacity of having been involved as a systemic practitioner in community projects with families in schools and in a youth justice context. It was my first time attending this particular meeting although this group of professionals met on a regular basis about community safety issues. There had been a series of meetings that had taken place before to think of ways to address the issue amidst growing frustrations from different residents and professionals who saw that ‘nothing was changing’.

## **The group of professionals**

The multi-agency professionals included senior staff from Youth Offending Services – Len; local secondary schools – Jan and Gary; Harry from the police for community affairs; Belinda from Housing; Lynn, a social worker; and a youth services worker, Susan. All had been involved in varying capacities with different families and young people in the community, some with more support- and welfare-orientated roles, such as social care and youth community service, others in a more surveillance- and order-based, social-order focused capacity. One of the social workers had attended the reflecting circles groups that I had facilitated some months before. Susan’s role within the intensive youth support team included trying to engage families who had been identified as ‘difficult to engage’ or ‘hard to reach’, and had been also associated with the young people named as being responsible for ‘anti-social’ and ‘problem

behaviours’. The police officer reiterated that the point had been reached where ‘things had escalated towards a major problem in the neighbourhood’.

### **Historical roots to the meeting**

The historical context to this particular sequence relates to the events outlined in Chapter 1; the tragic death of a young person in the community who had been the victim of a group attack when he was in another neighbourhood. I had responded at that time to the school and community request as discussed in Chapter 1. Reflective listening circles informed by Andersen’s reflecting teams (1995) were a way of responding to the request of families to express the sensitive and powerful issues that were experienced at that time. They offered a way of bringing people together and voicing some of the effects on the community and the support young people needed. A series of the reflective circles for the families and school staff and community groups was subsequently set up, responding to requests by those who had been affected.

### **Systemic Limbering up Questions Before the Meeting**

Systemic questions were triggered for me early on, from the telephone conversation I had with Len at the point when I was invited to join. ‘Anti-social behaviour’ was a very generalised and professional term. All sorts of questions, such as what it meant and looked like, and for whom, sprang up as an internal possible set of questions. I was also feeling overwhelmed, however, and there may have been a sense sparked in me from my previous involvement and memory of facilitating reflecting team conversations with a group of young people and their families following the loss of a young person in the community. As I recalled the emotion in that talk at that time, I became very much informed by the loss and how that connected to what was happening in the community now. I was struck quite emotionally as I prepared to enter the meeting with the group. I was led to a different type of detail around a question of what being responsive to the moves of others looks and feels like. I am interested how my own ‘biographical lived-body’ can be located within a situation and how, ‘by sharing these experiences ... an embodied therapeutic narrative can be developed’ (Shaw, 2003, p.46). I wondered what families in this community needed right now and what were the things that mattered most to them.

I wondered what I might bring systemically that would be different. Perhaps to enter and guide a way into the complexity of what was happening around violence, knife and gun crime and the implications for

families and the local community. I slowed myself from assuming any knowledge by generating my curiosity and also questioning the questions I am more inclined towards – for example, what are the questions that are *not* asked and the meaning of this?

- What are the activities we are talking about under this term anti-social behaviour?
- For whom is it most a problem?
- What are the different stories and contexts informing this issue?
- How are different people positioned in relation to this issue and to what extent are they being positioned by others?
- How are relationships being constructed around this?
- How can we construct more desired stories and appreciative descriptions about activities of young people perhaps not yet seen? What relationships may be reconstructed around these activities?
- Where are the openings and opportunities to create new narratives around young people?
- What existing activities might they like to build upon, and what new ones can be created?

## **Losing balance**

This part of the sequence comes in the first part of the meeting. It is prompted by my being introduced to the group by the senior Youth Justice manager as a ‘professional expert’. I experienced a momentary sense of ‘losing balance’, as the utterance immediately jarred with me as it was made, and it momentarily threw me. I went through a process of self-reflexive grappling as I attempted to reposition and recover my systemic balance through an internal questioning of my reaction and an externally move to guide questions to the group. I wondered to what degree my involvement in facilitating a dialogue at a very sensitive and difficult time with groups in the community some fourteen months earlier informed this grand term used by the professional group. Also my internal wonderings about the emotional issues that may have been raised by the earlier loss in the community for the professional group but not yet expressed or spoken made me curious about how their positioning to current issues expressed as a ‘serious problem’ was being informed by this significant episode.

A statutory context was brought to everyone’s attention by the police officer Harry, who announced that ‘the court had made an order, a dispersal order’ prohibiting the movement of young people in certain areas. A handful of young people were made subject to this order, and the dialogue that followed

suggested these ‘statutory sanctions’ seemed to have little effect. The language used was very factual and formal, stating what the order meant, its consequences, and the ‘imposed sanctions’ with statutory consequences if it was not upheld within recognised timeframes. The language of punishment, blame and culpability indicated a grammar of certainty and linear causality, and I wondered about the stories being constructed around each of the young people and their dominant, totalising effect when based on one aspect of behaviour taking very little account of their other experiences or historical, cultural, family or societal contexts. I sensed an urgency in the way that Len uttered his opening words ‘... things are getting worse and we need to do something immediately’; as I looked around the group different people in the group were nodding in agreement.

Len (YOT): [Speaking to the group] ‘I think we all agree that things are getting worse and we need to do something immediately. We have asked Helen along [looking at me] and it’s great to have you on board. We need your professional expertise and we’ve had to act quickly. We need do something about this problem of anti-social behaviour.’

[Pause]

Helen: ‘Would anyone like to step into this invitation? I was wondering what a big space you might need. I imagine there is a lot of expertise out in the community?’

There was some laughter around the room at this point.

This first utterance momentarily had an effect of destabilising me, as my expectation was that I would join with others in sharing and exploring ongoing dialogue with the group. Momentarily it seemed like there were different expectations and anticipations from others in the conversational space. I used a very instant response, which was a position that perhaps challenged the introduction of this kind. It had the effect of creating a momentary loss of balance by the term ‘professional expertise’ and the anticipations set up within that term. There was a sense of urgency in Len’s voice and the manner in which he made his comment. The anticipatory looks around the room added to my felt sense of partly discomfort and curiosity. It was a space where we were negotiating positions, a place of uncertainty and a ‘not knowing’ space (Mason, 1993).

Helen: ‘Who do you think wants professional expertise most? I am imagining professional expertise may be experienced for different people in this room, and also for different members of the community, for

young people and their families. What sort of expertise are you hoping for? And what sort of expertise might families be hoping for?’

Jan: ‘I am working with a small group of boys and when boys are together there is always trouble. I feel quite powerless to know what to do.’

Helen: ‘And how does that sense of powerlessness connect for others?’

Harry: ‘Well I think things are going to get worse and we need to do something.’

Helen: ‘What do other people think in reaction to what Harry and Jan are saying? What might other people outside of this group think?’

[Pause]

This initial perception of being placed in a position of ‘having all the answers’, of being prescriptive and an ‘all-knowing’ professional with distancing talk or jargon was an unhelpful one for me to stay with, and I wondered how I could reposition quickly and move on from this initial felt sense that was quite constraining. Often in climbing I have to steer my internal dialogue to motivational and encouraging self-talk, acknowledging debilitating influences that pass but are unhelpful in enabling my moves. Therefore finding ways of shifting into another position is important. I wondered about what I could bring to this conversation that would be different, and I attempted to ask questions that were more relational. Paradoxically, in asking questions I was perhaps demonstrating a type of expertise, and, indeed, was taking a lead whilst I was attempting to reposition myself.

Helen: ‘How connected is the powerlessness Jan talks about with the wanting expertise Len has introduced, I wonder? And how does a sense of things getting worse affect how you go on in your relationships in the community?’

Harry: ‘I am just waiting for something to happen. We have to do something.’

Helen: ‘If I was a parent walking in, joining this conversation, how would I be hearing this?’



## Reflection

All of these questions in hindsight reflected my felt sense of a need to move away quickly from the knowing space being offered; however, I also perhaps tripped up on my own assumptions about this. The pace of the dialogue, with the little space between the different questions I was asking, left no room for response, and paradoxically I could have been acting into the expectation by performing, to some extent, an expertise position in asking questions. The sense I had was similar to fumbling around on a rock face for a foothold, knowing one is there but not quite identifying it sufficiently to establish a purchase or enable a shift. I was searching for questions as feelers that shifted an idea of external higher knowledge to invite the inclusion of other voices. This invitation in my question was not taken up.

Belinda (Housing): ‘We need to do something about “anti-social behaviour”; it has got so out of hand.’

Harry: ‘There’s no one setting any boundaries around these young people and they are not even keeping to the ones the court have made. They will have to take the consequences of it. We have to act on this before it gets worse.’

[Pause]

Jan: ‘When boys are together there’s trouble.’

Belinda: ‘Young people don’t seem to care. There’s no respect. There’s nothing I can do.’

Others in the group joined with what seemed like a chorus of ‘we don’t know what to do’, ‘we have to do something but what can we do’, ‘we have done everything’. One professional described feeling ‘powerless’. These comments are depicted in the snapshot of professional utterances in figure 3, atomic model.

My next question was to draw attention to a perspective that had not yet been considered.

Helen: ‘Can I invite you to take a young person’s position in the room and a parent’s position and tell me how you are hearing this conversation?’

[Pause]

There was a different tone in the room as I asked:

Helen: ‘What language are you noticing? What picture is being portrayed and how would you be in relation to that?’

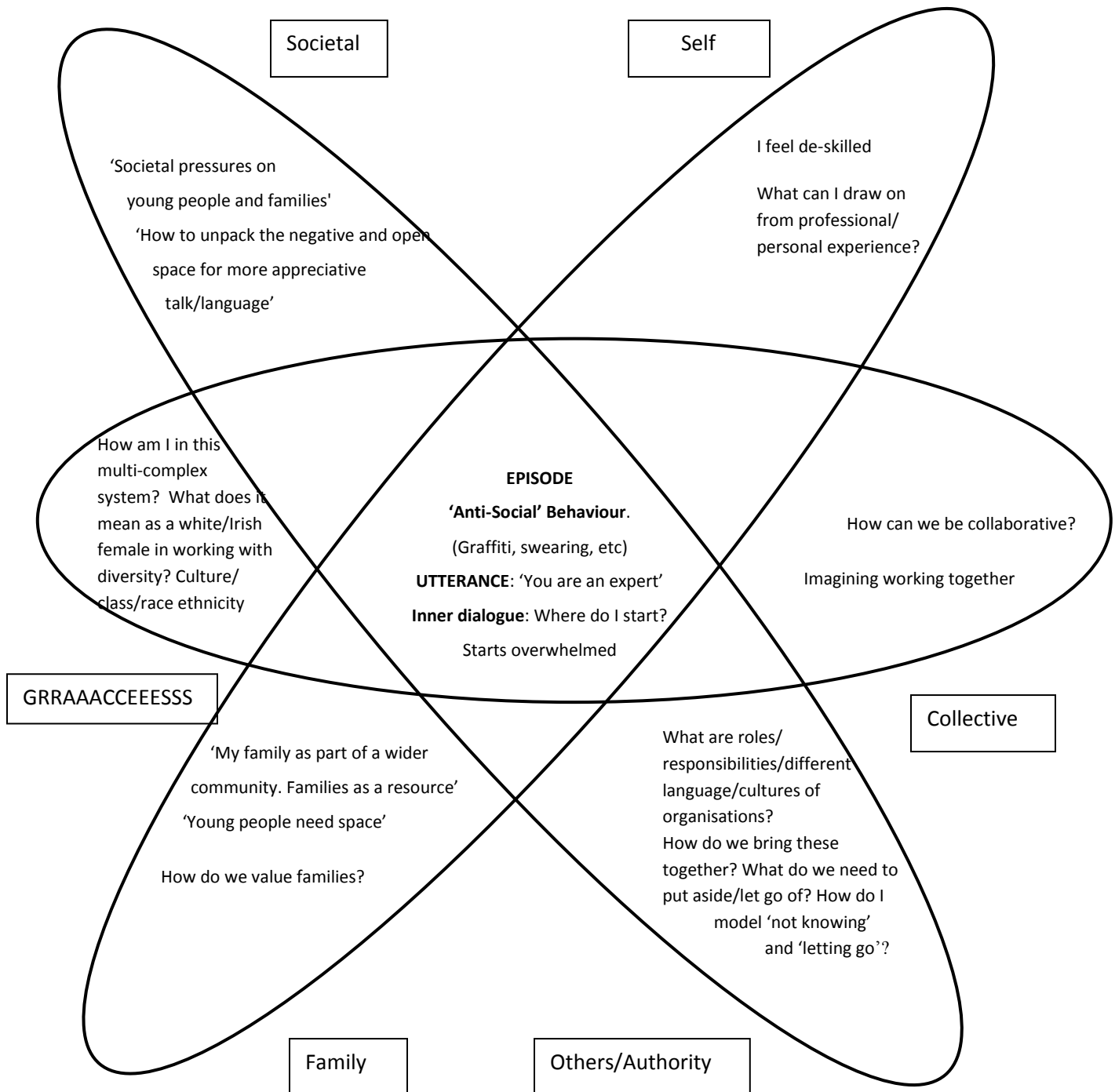
A different type of talk began to emerge, and there was an opening as people started to acknowledge some of the assumptions being made and the blind spots that were coming into view. Susan was brave enough to name hers, saying that sometimes she is blind to some of the really great stuff that young people are involved in. She also spoke of a conversation with a mother who described feeling ‘invisible’ to services, and of being aware of another parent saying ‘no one asks us’. I invited the group to stay with this and reflect on it with the question ‘How do we bring those families who have remained invisible into view? How can we amplify the voices that do not get heard?’ This allowed me also to wonder about the conversations that had gone before, what was helpful and what not so helpful, what conversations were shared with families and what hopes they may have expressed.

### **Regaining balance: Disposition to repositioning**

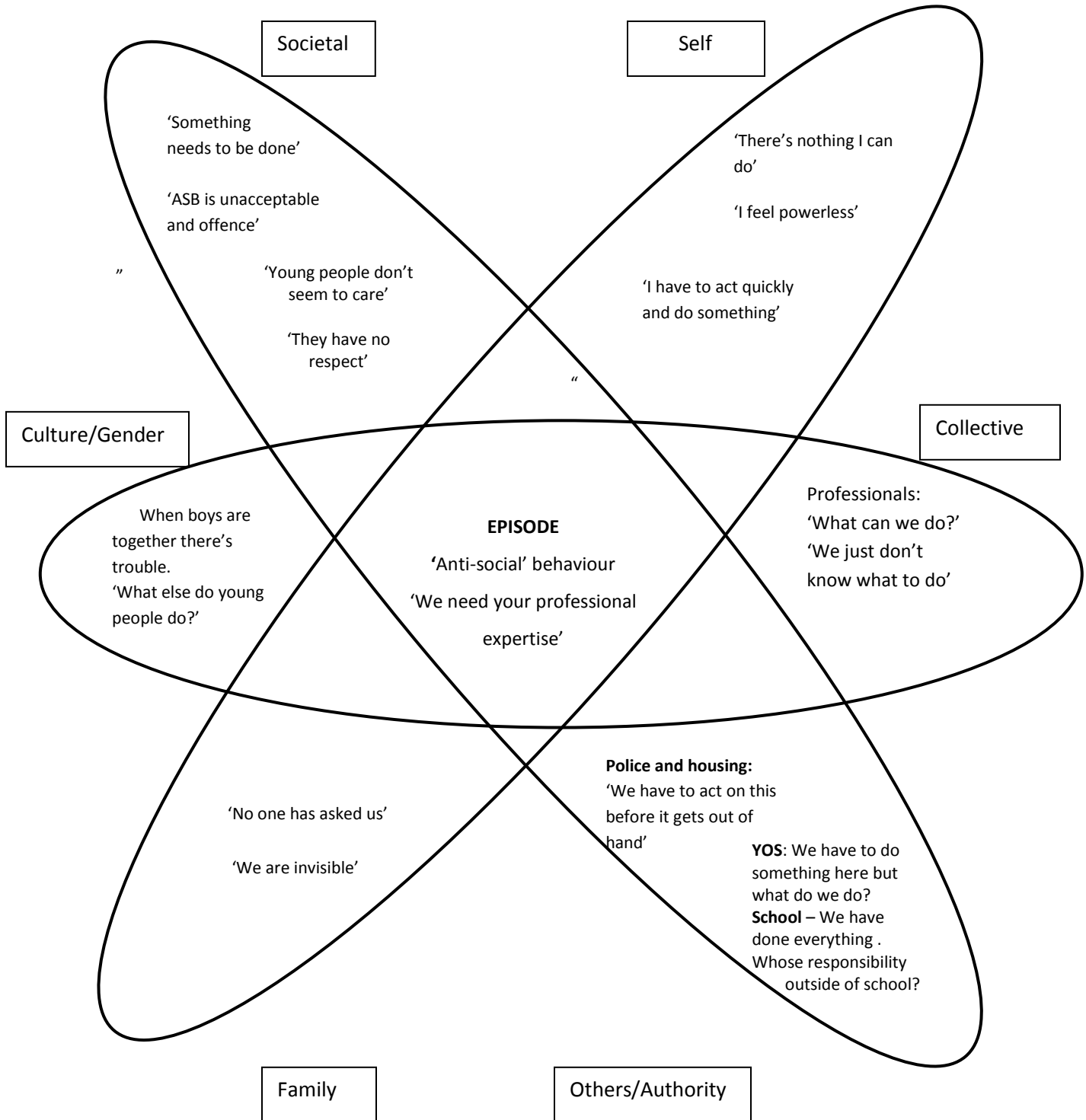
The atomic model offers a snapshot illustration of my internal dialogue, from the different contextual sites stemming from the initial utterance that caught me off balance. It illuminates some of my felt sense and embodied disposition and the process of my systemic repositioning. I drew a deep breath in this moment as I asked a self-reflexive question, similar to an internal dialogue I might have before a particular move on a rock route that presents a particular challenge. I become aware of my breathing and the quality of taking a deep and a deliberate set of breaths not obvious to others. Here I stayed in the pause, helping me regain some balance, and as I slowed down my own process this felt more stable. The generating curiosity that had been momentarily subdued came sharply back into vision. I was curious about the context that had not been voiced and the multiple contexts in this conversation. There was an apparent anxiety and need to act and do something when perhaps more reflection and different position taking to understand the issues more may have been more helpful. I shared this internal wondering space and invited reflections back, and in doing so I was realigning my position in the conversation to create a way

for all of us to go on. This felt like moving through a crux point, enabled by my earlier systemic limbering up and stretching which was keeping me supple and prepared for the spontaneous happenings in this conversation, much as it would do on a climbing episode. My internal dialogue is informed by a multitude of other personal and professional contexts in these spontaneous episodes that can throw me off balance at any time.

**Figure 2: Atomic model showing a snapshot of my self-reflexive grapplings**



**Figure 3: Snapshot of professional group utterances**



## **Atomic models: Reflection**

The atomic models provide a snapshot of the different contexts informing me in this early episode, and how I am drawing on my own personal stories of growing up in a family as a young person and needing space. Thinking of my own family as part of a wider community I was wondering how families and their cultural differences are valued and considered. All questions about my own culture, race and ethnicity emerge through this lens, and I acknowledge different contexts as a white Irish female brought up within certain 'faith' influences. I am curious about both the support and influences of faith groups within community practices. I was wondering about the societal pressures on young people and how they are constructed, and also how different forms of discrimination impacts on families. Although my story of self was momentarily one of feeling overwhelmed, deskilled and 'off balance', I was also connecting to what I can draw on from personal experience. I have introduced a collective as part of the model as I am asking myself how I go on and position in the collective sense. This brings into vision roles, responsibilities and ethics. These are placed alongside some of the utterances of different professionals within our conversation, and I explore now how I came to track these through mapping the utterances and their multiple contexts in the group. These served transparently as a snapshot of how different professionals were being organised around each of the contextual factors rather than being used as an analytical tool. This was shared in the group so as to consider how we wanted to go on.

The naming and exploration of the concerns that were so clearly a strong pull factor and linking these with the contextual influences is explored. My following question had the effect of stretching the conversation.

Helen: 'How difficult is it to be in these concerns? What other worries are attached to these?'

## **Stretching forward**

This question was an attempt to stretch forward and into a different and more personally connected territory; although I did not have a full understanding, I had a sense of how tragic and sad that was and I wondered how everyone in the room had been affected. At the same time I was also thinking of the areas it felt important to stretch towards and tune into, such as issues of social difference and diversity and an

understanding of our blind spots being white and also, possibly, from Eurocentric cultures. This question actually opened up more personal and emotional stories from different professionals who spoke about feeling huge hurt and loss, and fears and concerns that another young person would be hurt were amongst some of the shared worries in the group. There was more of an emotional connection and felt sense in the room, as evidenced by the more tentative way people were talking. The fragility resonated with me as I thought about young people I knew, like nephew, nieces and godchildren, all at an age when adults worry about them. I also appreciated, as different professionals talked, their efforts and concerns. There was an appreciative feel within the group as more space was created to reflect on this. It seemed a point where the otherness of the other entered me and made me other (Shotter, 1993b), as I connected to the sadness and memories of those who had worked closely with the families most affected at that time.

An opening for a more self-reflexive shift here was countered by an ongoing pull towards the current concerns, with a hint of what that is like in the experience for different professionals, and the need for ‘professional expertise’ had a different feel to it.

Len: ‘The courts are really coming down heavy on this and the team are doing all they can but we need some expertise.’

Helen: ‘Where are you in relation to what is happening at the moment for young people? What have you noticed young people and their families need at this time? And what are the things that help?’

This was an attempt to stretch the group and to draw in the ‘expertise’ of other people from their different positions. I felt a real heaviness in the room in the talk as though it was quite weighty.

Belinda: ‘There’s a lot that’s been going on. There’s a group of young people who don’t seem to care about anyone else. They are hanging around the estate in groups being really loud and obnoxious, swearing, littering, shouting, fighting. We have talked to their families and that hasn’t worked, there’s been no change in behaviour.’

## **Reflection**

The significant pull of the problem talk in my felt sense was like that of a climber attempting to make a move but being tugged by a rope that was restricting movement. I needed to model a stretching out of

some kind as I was feeling quite ‘swamped’ and overwhelmed. This word ‘swamped’ seemed to come into my visions and I wondered about this image of the word (Averill, 1982; 1992), drawing on what Wittgenstein says about the words and phrases we use when we talk about feelings, and – in this case for me it came into my view – actually create and contribute to the way we feel. I was wondering how the feelings and stories I was connecting were impacting on what I was hearing, and what I was possibly missing in this conversation with the professional group.

Helen: ‘I’m wondering about the effect of how young people are described and discussed ... how they feel they are perceived and the impact of this on the behaviour you describe. What do young people need from adults in all of this?’

[Pause]

In the pause I asked if could share something I had read in the local newspaper to the group. There was a piece written earlier in the week with the headline ‘Crisis of anti-social behaviour’, calling for ‘something to be done’. It described young people as ‘local jobs’ and ‘pests’ with ‘no respect for anyone’. There was no young person’s perspective or knowledge, and this reflected perhaps the societal view with its very narrow lens for that period, picking up on societal descriptions and attitudes with regard to young people.

I opened a reflective space around my questions: what is the effect on young people of such descriptions? How can we notice when young people are being considerate to others? How can we notice the many qualities that young people have? I shared some of my observations of a young person offering to carry the heavy bag of a senior citizen on my journey to the meeting. This led to others in the group sharing everyday examples of the displays they had experienced by young people of sharing, caring and humour, unpacking and sharing positive and helpful stories of young people, and generating curiosity about those unreported deeds of really caring and considerate behaviour by young people that was possibly invisible. This created a space for a further question.

Helen: ‘How do young people know that the adults around them appreciate and care? And what do they need from adults at this time?’

This brought a shift towards care and support and unpacked the key elements of adults showing care and support. Susan, Lynn and Jan’s talk shifted from working with two of the boys ‘around their anger management’, focusing on fighting and anger management support, to thinking more contextually as I



asked questions about what informed different angry responses. Feeling valued and a sense of belonging, wanting to be heard, and being listened to without judgement, came from this shift.

Helen: ‘And how do the boys see that support? What do they value most?’

I had a felt sense of things moving in the dialogue and, as I was realigning in the talk, I was also noticing a need to keep the momentum going, requiring a shift on my part and a stretch forward to enable others to extend and to invite different positions to be taken by asking a different type of relationally reflexive question:

Helen: ‘How are we in this conversation? Is it ok to stay with some of the many different positions and experience of feeling heard and supported? And map this from the different perspectives in this room and also the multiple perspectives of young people and their families? What are the hopes and wishes for the future?’

[Pause]

There was a look of interest and unanimous nodding as I suggested us ‘mapping out’ together some of the personal and professional issues around the concerns and issues already raised. All the different professional positions, young peoples’ positions and family positions were described, and I invited people to take up different positions within this and explore, first of all, what adopting different professional positions was like, then relationships, and then go on to describe what care and support looked like.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **SEQUENCING MOVES**

#### **Inviting different positions**

Helen: 'Can I invite people into different positions for a little while and [see] what new noticing that brings?'

I invited each person to take a different professional position. This was enthusiastically taken up and there was more tentative talk from each different position. Contexts of difference emerged. At this point I was also tuning into the more personally connected talk emerging as I inquired what the experience of talking from a different position is like. I was also taking a different vantage point from the one I had at the beginning in terms of expertise, asking whether, if I did position there, that would be more of a joining with others to create new possibilities and ways of going on. By taking a different position myself I had to also question my own assumptions and biases. How can I respect the request, a professional need for expertise, without 'knowing'? 'Knowing,' Anderson says, 'is the culprit that speeds us up or steers us in a direction that may be too different' (1997, p.60). This was to inform my question, it drew attention to the pace and response and the effect in terms of how to go on.

What followed was more sharing of backgrounds and personal as well as professional contexts. I shared that I was informed by a perspective of having worked in the past as a youth and community worker, permitting a different type of relationship in the community than when I worked as a probation officer. I also introduced different contexts, such as my own culture, and as I spoke I sketched out the atomic model (Pearce, 1994), which became a useful practical tool to illuminate features of the talk. The effect this had was to pave the way for others to speak from a first-person position in relation to values and beliefs around different types and experiences of training.

Harry: 'I don't see the world in the same way Marylyn [the social worker] would see it. We might as well talk a different language at times. Police officer training offers a particular view and I know that position for young people and their families can be immediately off-putting.'

Lyn: 'At times we have completely different takes about what should happen around a young person. We don't always see eye-to-eye when I guess it's the police role to arrest and it's my role to offer support to the family. I am also of the personal view that young people should be given a chance.'

Helen: 'So what can help us see different other's worldviews?'

Harry: 'We might get on better.'

Everyone laughed at this point but there was a serious note to it.

Helen: 'I know Harry is being playful here but, seriously, what are the relationships that would be most affected, personally and professionally?'

In exploring the different personal and professional views that emerged and how they informed current relationships within the community a space was opened that allowed us to talk about what enhanced and constrained the relationships we are all in. The organisational cultures and ethos got in the way of a creative ability to make a positive change in people's lives, and the extent to which an increasing amount of time was spent on 'official structures, inputting data and administrative tasks that squeezed time from meeting with people' was introduced by Len and shared by all of us. Marylyn actually said she 'felt more like an administrator and less like a social worker'. Harry acknowledged the frustration of his police officers being 'caught up in an overwhelming paper trail' that had quite a constraining effect as there was less time for direct work with people. Do different languages within organisational cultures optimise the space here, allowing us to extend the lens to differences in personal contexts informing us of gender, culture, age, class and other social differences? How might young people and their families relate to you through a different lens?

## **Reflection**

'Mapping personal and professional stories' (Hedges and Lang, 1993) is a method in my systemic training that helped explore how different client stories in therapy resonate with mine. I use the idea of mapping here, rather than a literal mapping, to facilitate a shift from purely a professional vantage point and to encourage a consideration of multiple informing contexts from a range of perspectives. This brought out some of the tolerances and restrictions of each of the professional perspectives and their roles.

This had a similar effect to that of a climber stretching to a place where they can obtain a clearer view of the rock face. It requires leaning back as well as looking at the finer detail of the rock and its features. My outer moves actually assisted me in moving to a different space in terms of the internal initial grapplings I plotted with the early professional utterances that were around, and reflected on shifting positions and contexts that people may have felt informed by. This invited different positions, reaching beyond generalisations and ‘problem’ talk. The exercise of mapping was also a way of inviting considerations about diversity within the multi-agency group of managers and other professionals in this meeting. I had been struck by the fact that there was no one of colour in the professional mix.

### **Illuminating Blind Spots: Bringing Issues of Social Difference into View**

I asked permission of the group to consider a framework that I had found useful, for thinking about issues of social difference, diversity and multiple contexts as a white professional. I warmed the context by sharing how I use the framework, to name some of the different contexts informing any one interpersonal episode, and also to help identify some potential blind spots that becomes illuminated for me in this process. The acronym GRRAACCCEES, written on the board, was a way of illuminating contexts of race, culture and other social differences in the talk and of prompting consideration of the different cultural, racial and ethnic communities represented in the neighbourhood. I modelled the taking of a different position here.

Helen: ‘I am a white female professional. Culturally I see myself as London Irish. I am just thinking of the experiences and responses I have grown up with as white Irish (dual-heritage female). Although growing up within a multicultural community my experiences will be different to that of my neighbour of colour. I am wondering about decisions and assumptions about people and the effect of these?’

Gary: ‘I react to people making assumptions about me. I come from Glasgow and I grew up with a lot of assumptions made about Scottish people that were not helpful.’

Helen: ‘What assumptions are we making about others all the time and what gets missed in making assumptions?’

## Reflection

Through mapping it seemed that bolder moves could be made as we entered the area of discrimination and blind spots to be explored. I was immediately more attuned and became more aware and sensitive to the language that was being used and the way young people were being constructed in the talk. I was informed by a multitude of questions that would invite issues of social difference, diversity of experiences also in individual families, unique aspects of living and worldviews to be considered. For example, how much or how little do we know about a young male who acts out in a violent way? What is informing him in how he does his anger? These sorts of questions were part of the reaching out within the mapping activity. The majority of families who participated in this neighbourhood work were of colour and from a range of cultural and ethnic contexts, including different parts of the African continent, the Caribbean and South America. There was huge diversity within each group, with variations in regional backgrounds, languages spoken, dialects, education, class and religion. These variations included how people saw themselves in relation to cultural and religious affiliations. The majority of those involved within the schools and community neighbourhood work were from similar socio-economic groups, marking another difference to that of the professionals. A central question informing me during the conversation with the professional group regarded my assumptions as I also positioned in relation to others. Thinking about how behaviours and cultural systems might be shaped and developed in Africa, Europe, Asia and elsewhere, for example, which in turn influence other cultural systems, were areas to be explored and not assumed. This approach brought into view the importance of being attuned to my own stories of difference and culture and my emerging culture as second-generation Irish, growing up in a multicultural neighbourhood in London and how that forms part of an ongoing reflective process for me, of realising who I am and who I am becoming. This process allows me to acknowledge other cultural systems (Cohen, 1998). I explore my own journey connected to this and the different influences raised within different episodes. I acknowledge this is a much bigger journey of appreciation of other cultural forms evolving over thousands of years.

I was wondering how to hold this balance of satisfying the initial need of the group for experts to solve what to do and being able to step outside it to explore the assumptions we were making about the issues that we were not living inside. The different relationships professionals occupied within their different roles seemed primarily focused on problem behaviours, and exposed different blind spots of the group and key areas that had gone unnoticed.

## **Reaching out and Making Connections from an ‘I’ Position and Moving Towards a ‘We’ Position**

Helen: ‘And what about young people’s concerns, needs and hopes? What do you imagine they might be?’

I used the word ‘concern’ to reintroduce into the grammar an alternative to ‘problem’, one which created more possible openings. I was also sensitive to the fact that this ‘problem’ had been named but not owned, as such, by the whole body of the neighbourhood. I was aware of this, and the more I tried to introduce an imaginary space for young people with questions such as ‘If we had a group of young people here, what would they claim to be the problem?’ I was encouraging an idea of finding a body of knowledge to try and close what appeared to be the wide gap between social orders and institutions and the social ecology in which they are embedded.

There was something in the performed, physical movement that was more deliberate and decisive and my intention and purpose to some degree, led me to wonder whether I was actually acting into a systemic expertise by taking a lead at this stage, to demonstrate a movement of reaching out to take up different positions that seemed to be called for in the moment. This can be likened to the moves of a climber trusting the space with others in this process. The act of reaching out has a different feel, it is more of a decisive move whilst being poised and flexible to respond to the unexpected, and this is similar to reaching out and making a move on a rock face. In this move in this conversation, I picked up a sense of momentum and change in the energy within the group that seemed to shift and open more of a possibility for everyone, including me, to adopt different positions in the room. It marked a position also in stretching forward to look beyond behaviour, and created curiosity about other meanings and contexts around anger, for example, and how that was informing different actions and being experienced in different ways. The anger young people felt at being constantly stopped by police was explored, and Harry shifted his position, acknowledging that different police officers’ approaches to young people led to more or less anger. This had a feel, as on a climb, of taking different body positions that allow new things to come to light, finding different holds that were previously unseen and enabling a range of different movements. Capabilities are extended as marginal reach, twists and turns of the body explored. In this mapping context I physically moved position from one part of the room to another and this inevitably created a shifting, shuffling and physical repositioning on everyone’s part. I invited others to take the opportunity and to change seats with someone else and this happened. There were immediate comments about the changing viewpoints, and I asked people just to reflect for a moment and think about this

difference, and also to imagine being in a different position, such as that of a young person or that of a member of one of the families they work with.

Helen: 'What do you imagine is the sense you may have from being in the experience from a different perspective of a parent or young person in this community?'

[Pause]

This was a long pause, and I wondered how difficult others may have been finding it to shift position. I was imagining what it might be like for a family member waiting for their son or daughter to come home. I connected with how worried I was as an aunt when my nephew was late back from a club or walking the streets with friends late at night. I was also informed by different discussions I had with parents whose children had been seriously hurt and of the suffering communities experienced after the loss of a young life.

Helen: 'I was thinking from a position of an aunt concerned about my nephew or niece doing something regular like going out with friends and really worrying about their safety.'

Susan: 'I imagine the perspectives would be very different from the young people themselves. I would feel trapped.'

Helen: 'And ... considering what that might be like for young people, how does that position you when you meet with young people next?'

Belinda: 'And even within the resident group there are those who come forward and those who do not and so there is a lot we do not really know.'

Jan: 'We have a different picture as we see children and young people in school and we do not really have a clue what life is like for them once they leave the premises.'

Helen: 'How would children and young people be with us if we did have a sense of what was going on for them. How would it change our relationship?'

We were all positioned in different ways around the question, and as I looked around the room I noticed Lyn was looking very reflective as though she was particularly struck by something in that moment. I sensed Lyn had made a more experiential connection and tentatively asked whether there was anything she might be willing to share. She described her felt sense of frustration and fear from a position of a parent. 'I am just connecting to the experience of one of the mums I have been working with. I sort of feel her pain as she describes some of the difficulties she is living with,' and she went on 'It's just struck me how hard it must be.'

Lyn: 'I can really feel a connection with this mother's frustration, I worry as a mum for my son when he doesn't come home. I feel the sense of frantic worry and loss.'

Helen: 'I am picking up your sense in your voice from that your experience of frantic worry and loss?'

[Pause]

I remained in the pause as Lyn was thinking. She seemed quite moved and emotional. Everyone was gripped in the listening as the boundary between Lyn as a mother and the mother she was reflecting on closed. She took a big sigh of despair as others joined in the worry as parents, as aunts and uncles in the room. The talk became far more impassioned and emotional.

Lyn: 'I wouldn't know what to do or where to turn.'

Len: 'I'd feel trapped and stuck with the problems and quite frustrated that professionals don't have a clue ... They walk in and out occasionally but do not have to live with it all.'

As these words were uttered I was picking up on people's different embodied responses, and my next question aimed to encourage further self- and relational reflexivity and model this also.

Helen: 'As people are talking I am feeling moved by the passion, frustration and worry expressed. What is it like talking from this position? What connections are you making?'

Lyn: 'I was just thinking how connected we are as professionals to the human story as parents and the very real worries and concerns for young people. At the same time we feel trapped and stuck. I can really



connect with this. I sometimes feel I am doing everything I can to help but have reached an impasse. I really don't know what to do next.'

I was struck by what seemed to be quite a significant shift from a personal and collective position and wondered where others were in this positioning. I was struck again by the way in which this was said. It was embodied and spoken with a real sense of significance.

Helen: 'What is it like for others hearing this? Is it similar or different?'

Gary: 'Whether a mum or dad, aunt or uncle, we are all in it together but it's so hard. I feel exhausted. It does feel like I can't see the wood for the trees sometimes. Not knowing a way through.'

Helen: 'How do we extend the "we", I wonder? Whose voices can join with us to help us as mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, sons, daughters, cousins, friends?'

## **Reflection**

This shift seemed to mark an acknowledgement of our connections to each other; I felt a strong momentum going with this, as the reflections being ignited were much more of a personal nature. I also was aware of my pace, and of slowing the pace of the group for reflective time whilst remaining open. Like a climber feeling the coordination between fellow climbers who are getting to know each other's movements and styles there was something more coordinated in our movement. The talk was more embodied: 'something very special occurs when two or more living beings meet and begin to *respond* to each other (more happens than them merely having an *impact* on one another)' (Shotter, 2010, p.2). Dialogue and responsivity are bodily encounters, as was experienced in the talk, especially when Lyn spoke about her efforts to 'help'. I also wondered about what it meant to be a female professional in a position of trying to be helpful. Was this something I was being informed by as a strong contextual force playing itself out here, that of being a helpful female. I became curious about what was being uttered about 'not knowing' and about exploring a space that felt quite different, seeing if it was a possible breakthrough and opening for new possibilities.

## Letting Go of the ‘Shoulds’ about Knowing

Gary and Lyn’s comments about ‘not knowing a way through’ and ‘not knowing what to do’ resonated for me. I could connect with these words as a not very comfortable space, but possibly one for professionals of learning, and a space for potential opening in a collective way. I wondered to what degree ‘not knowing’ was out of the comfort zone of some more than others. Informed by these in-the-moment wonderings, I invited the group into an exploratory and inquiring space with me and all were keen to join.

Helen: ‘What is it like working with these issues? How are other people with not knowing?’

[Pause]

This seemed a long pause while people looked around at each other as if to see who would be the first to talk. I was paying close visual attention to how people were in the pause, their facial expressions, their breathing. Both Len and Harry sighed and leant back in their chair at this stage. I wondered what these and other non-verbal clues meant, and it led me to reflect on how I show not-knowing, such as at the beginning of our conversation when I felt off balance. This felt like a different not-knowing as I broke the silence, even though there was a lot going on in the silence.

Helen: ‘Are we in a not-knowing space now? It feels quite a tentative place, a bit uncertain and not sure what the silences mean or how this conversation is going?’

[Pause]

This was a long pause. It felt like a silence where there was a not-knowing and perhaps a need for something more to act as a stepping stone to continue the dialogue.

Helen: ‘Maybe it is uncertain too and maybe a bit ambiguous and anxiety-provoking, even, at times. There are times when I am more ok with uncertainty than others and sometimes ...’

As I looked around I kept talking, hoping that expressing some of my felt sense of this uncertainty might enable others to join in and that my talking might act like a scaffold or a bridge.

In the active silent space I made direct eye contact with Len as he seemed poised to respond. I stopped talking and simply gestured openly.

Len: I find it really hard as a manager, as everyone comes to me and I know how hard everyone is working but I don't have all the answers. Sometimes it's hard to see the wood for the trees.'

Helen: 'And what does that mean for you?'

Len: 'I am a manager and I am supposed to know; not-knowing is not a very solid place to be.'

Lyn connected with this.

Lyn: 'I have tried everything to address things with young people and their families and feel I have hit an impasse.'

Lyn's voice wavered here for a moment. I felt a fragility from her that seemed to centre on something that was being triggered, and Belinda and Susan followed.

Susan: 'I feel stuck.'

Belinda: 'Where do we go with young people.'

Gary: 'We are in ... I feel I am in the thick of it ...'

## **Reflection**

There was commitment and care as people spoke from personal positions, and it was moving for speakers and listeners. Len described feeling 'at a bit of a standstill' and felt a need for 'expertise'. Gary felt there were serious implications for the young people involved who, he thought, needed leadership, as some were certainly heading for permanent exclusions from his school. Gary and Harry talked about a fallback position of doing almost automatically what the system expected, sticking closely to the rules that did not actually help, as he found that more rigid and sanctioning responses and approaches with young people

were ineffective and negotiation and collaboration worked better. My response was to move to inviting a reframe of not-knowing, opening a consideration of not-knowing as an essential for working in collaborative ways alongside each other and respecting difference and diversity.

Helen: ‘What if not-knowing in all its uncertainty was an essential ingredient for working together and respecting our diversities and differences? How would you feel if a professional assumed a knowledge they did not have about your experience or your life?’

This created some stir as it had not been considered.

Len: ‘I hadn’t thought about it like that.’

Helen: ‘What would give you permission not to know a little more? What might that bring forth in others?’

There was a buzz around the room, accompanied by a number of different instant reflections: ‘That feels quite liberating actually.’ New ideas came from this, such as the need ‘to offer more space, and trust young people a bit more’ and not jump to the worst possible conclusions, and to recognise that young people and their families perhaps had more local expert knowledge. Giving time and staying with the uncertainty a bit more was another conclusion, along with giving more space for young people and their families to share their thought and ideas. What felt like many action points and ways forward came from this, and we were able to build on these later as a way forward.

### **Entering into and Exploring Metaphor: Exploring Bodily Knowing**

During the conversation, as I was wondering how to help the group stay a bit longer with the not-knowing without going into a fall-back position (or at least slowing it down a bit), I felt like a climber suggesting a fellow climber stay with a particular move and practise it so as to become more familiar with the feel of it. Feel what it is like to twist your body into a certain position that creates a marginal stretch. We live each situation with bodies that sense much more than we might think or directly know. It reminded me of Gendlin’s (1997) body-sense. Going into my body-sense means ‘I hear from the “*me*” that “*I*” don’t know so well’ (Gendlin, 1997, p.79).

Having invited the group to move to a different vantage point for a short while we entered, explored and moved through the different metaphors offered, including being ‘caught in an impasse’, ‘stuck’, ‘not seeing the wood for the trees’, and the feel became more playful and curious. Exploring, for example, what represented the trees for different professional perspectives in the room included some of the time demands to get something done and the pressure of the court order and targets, through to more personal ones and the devastating effects of young people getting hurt, and the gravity and far-reaching pain of the hurt and the loss. The trees represented fears and also assumptions about anti-social behaviour escalating to a point of ‘getting out of hand’. Entering into the graphic sense of these metaphors generated all sorts of creative questions and attempts to find a way through them: who can help guide a way through the trees and what would the roles, responsibilities and tasks be of finding a way through and getting more clarity and coordination? What creates even a tiny bit of movement when things feel stuck? This not only casts some things into shadow but bring others into light (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Pocock, 1999).

Being inside the metaphor with others offered a way also of exploring more bodily senses and curiosity about bodily knowing and what might help in terms of these needs. For example, being ‘in the thick of it’ was described as ‘feeling heavy’ with the ‘weight bearing down upon my shoulders’. Exploring what the weight was made up of, and what would make it lighter, brought us into the detail of roles, responsibilities and relationships. ‘Who could help take some of the weight off? How much? What would it feel like when it’s just enough? How do you notice heavily weighted others and what might lift things for them?’ Everyone could relate to the metaphors, join and explore them, and the group reflected the real learning from this exploration.

What came from these metaphors were very rich and resourceful positions within the experience of not-knowing and how that might become a possible resource. The dialogue took on a unique and personal quality as everyone spoke more from a direct, lived-in position where they experienced personal impact and yet also shared collective connections. As I listened to contributors elaborate more fully with rich descriptions each struck a chord with my own senses in the moment, and whilst at times the complexity of being in the experience was overwhelming, there were ways that could be navigated through with others. This was summed up as the group extended the metaphor ‘We’re in the thicket together’, and my response to explore this was to imagine what kind of learning goes on in the thicket: ‘Is this possibly a useful place to be for a while so as to actually find a way through?’ This was a playful way of joining in the metaphor but also with a serious connotation of the sense of the complexity of being in real, everyday life with others and indeed as a way to work through the complexity and multifaceted nature of this experience together. In reflecting on the talk afterwards, people described a change in not only how the

meeting felt but also in how their positions change. One aspect of change was a sense from feeling ‘a lone worker out on a limb’, to feeling ‘a more collective sense and that we are all in this together’. Another speaker described a feeling of ‘something being lifted as she realised she did not have to have all the answers’. I felt certainly elated when I heard another reflection: ‘There is expertise all around us, we just have to open our eyes more and invite that in.’

## **Learning and Action from the Conversation**

All sorts of action points came from this conversation, based on a drive to engage with others. There was a commitment to ‘buddy up’, to walk (get to know the community more) and talk with people in the community and to reach out more and connect with the local knowledge of shopkeepers, local businesses, churches and mosques, schools and youth and community groups. There were different ways of inviting others into conversations, but these had to fit with what is appropriate and appealing to different groups so a consultation process inviting different members of the community to advise and guide the network was considered. The schools professionals had all sorts of wonderful ideas for enlisting a range of different young people to encourage their views. There was a commitment to ‘look, listen and notice more the resources and capacities within the community’. With every point I asked ‘How are you going to do this? What will it look like?’ One of the action points was ‘to reflect a bit more rather than feel I have to dash into action mode’ and to ‘take a professional hat off to see a bit more clearly what’s out there and in front of my eyes’.

I suggested referring back to the map throughout this part of the conversation to see if there were areas that needed attending to and things to consider around engagement. My questions throughout this stage included how they positioned as they look at these issues, and what needed to be attended to (let go of or done more) to enable change. Letting go of some of the ‘shoulds’ around ‘knowing’ was unanimously agreed within the group, as was the need to trust parents and young people. Breaking down what this would look like was important also in terms of what professionals need to sustain without resorting to a fallback position.

An important area that appeared whilst looking for blind spots on the map was the need to turn the spotlight onto the press and local newspapers. Questions about how to influence the stories being written about young people and how to change the language were raised and a separate plan began to be generated around that and further conversations that needed to happen regarding that.

## **Moving on Together: The Direction this Took in Action**

I was invited to facilitate a number of dialogues in tenants' halls, schools, cafés, local halls and other community settings about the needs, concerns and hopes and dreams of different people. A number of reflective follow-up meetings were planned to continue the dialogue and invite more 'others', widening the circle. This took place alongside meetings with different groups of young people in and outside of schools, giving a voice to what matters.

When we met again all sorts of things had changed and been illuminated. Hearing local residents express their worries about losing business and feeling disrespected by some of the thoughtless actions of large groups of young people coming out of school was helpful. The school had sanctioned giving more trust to young people by allowing the youth worker and me to work with a group of young people who were close to being permanently excluded, meeting out of school for reflective discussion groups. Together we formed what the young people named 'The Breakfast Club'. At first the young people used this space to voice their anger and frustration about local youth clubs and other youth services closing and having nothing to do, as well as their sense that they 'were not liked by adults' and were 'always being told off'. They described feeling that 'no one wanted to listen' and that 'adults kept well away ... except the police who are always stopping us'. These meetings with young people evolved in time into a space for thinking about their hopes and dreams, and a space emerged that generated all sorts of ideas including community questionnaires which the young people designed. It became a space of dialogue where they worked towards sharing their views with the adult groups about 'not feeling safe', that 'being in groups helped them feel safer', about 'losing a friend' and its emotional meaning, and also how it left them feeling fearful with a sense of 'what's next?' Bringing everyone to share in dialogue in a series of reflecting circle formats took a commitment and courage on all parts. Hearing young people sharing what it was like for them when they felt unsafe, of 'wanting to feel useful and involved' and also needing sometimes to hear positives about what they do whilst being able to 'mess up at times' and wanting to have 'our views heard as if it matters' was very moving for every adult in the room. Professionals and non-professional alike, we were moved. 'Words are not only heard or received but they also move the talker. These movements can be seen and felt by the listener, who in turn is moved' (Fredman, 2007, p.49). Within these reflecting circles the honesty and insight the young people showed was appreciated, and their openness about their hurt also encouraged others to find a voice to express the community sense of loss and what that meant. 'For there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience' (hooks, 1994, p.91). Everyone came out with changed perceptions, and young people

also appreciated that, despite how they were feeling, there was a need to show respect to others who were trying hard to make a living and just getting on with their lives. This felt like relational responsibility in action with everyone coming with valid lived and embodied knowledge. It was a space that created a going on together.



## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **SYSTEMIC POSITIONING WITHIN EMBODIED REFLEXIVE INQUIRY**

This chapter brings a close to this inquiry and provides an opportunity to reflect on the process of the journey, what has emerged and the implications for ongoing practice and inquiry. This stage of closing also marks an opportunity to summarise and consider the new beginnings that are already in motion with a momentum from the learning and the sharing of this learning. The different avenues stemming from the inquiry in different capacities beyond this thesis, is discussed and the ongoing developments, applications and achievements that have emerged in the process of exploration through an embodied reflexive orientation.

First I reflect on what this inquiry has been about and what it has shown. The language used in this final chapter, will not use terms such as ‘conviction’, ‘evidence’, ‘outcome’. I use embodied information as ‘data’, distinguishing it clearly away from a modernist research context and positivist language game (Wittgenstein, 1953). The criteria that this inquiry has set out to fulfil come from a philosophy that has a relational and participative orientation and acknowledges that ‘we are all engaged in a form of inquiry’ (McNamee and Hosking, 2012). This is an ontology about relational embodied practices and what it means to be a person in the world. The criteria as set out in Chapter 1, draws from the Professional Doctorate programme and the field of qualitative research that is coherent with this inquiry genre.

#### **Evaluation of the criteria**

##### **a) The inquiry is a worthy topic**

This inquiry aims to enrich people’s lives and enhance the relational responsiveness and reflexivity of those professionals working with families who have restricted access to power and services. All the conversations within this inquiry address stories often not heard or told within dominant hierarchical discourses (Kincheloe, 1997). A social justice objective is inherent in this inquiry, empowering people through dialogue in complex community situations that significantly impact on communities’ ways of ‘going on together’. Woven into the systemic practice illustrated in this inquiry, and implicit in each of

the conversations, is a wish to help people overcome beliefs and dominant ideas of knowledge. In Chapter 6, the impact of dominant, authoritative and hierarchical discourses and deficit language on Lorna were versions of events that had been created and had presented Lorna a 'bad parent'. This had marginalised and silenced (Jones, 1993, p.139) other positive voices and perceptions. Through a process of opening a space in dialogue, to illuminate Lorna's abilities and qualities, there was a repositioning towards a more appreciative noticing of Lorna's abilities and qualities that had remained previously unseen. This encapsulates a theme evident throughout this inquiry, with the aim of bringing forth an abundance of stories for families of resilience, ability and multiple knowledge-sharing that provide new and generative ways of going on. A therapeutic way of being that is tentative and sensitive, in order to position in ways that facilitate collaboration and participation within conversations, is a worthy topic. Chapter 1 illustrates this focus in the exploration with Joe about ways of being that included respectful listening, and embodied responsiveness to parents' expressed needs. Within this process there is a reassessing of how I experience and understand ; the world my clients, myself and my role as a practitioner and inquirer, that has reflexive value to systemic practice inquiry.

#### **b) The inquiry is original or novel**

Novel and original features of this inquiry are introduced by the emphasis on body and metaphor. The metaphor of rock climbing in particular, is introduced as a new feature, an embodied activity and knowledge from another context that can be used within a practice and training context, to examine and enhance an understanding of coordination with others. Its originality and application as a tool of practice inquiry suggests there is no comparable specific literature and I have drawn therefore from general literature regarding metaphor. A new path is created in inquiry through the use of this embodied metaphor to explore systemic positioning within conversations. It is critically situated within embodiment-related literature, drawing inspiration from scholars in different dialogical and embodiment spheres (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978; Bakhtin, 1981; Shotter, 1993) and practice-specific inspirers (Roberts, 1994; Anderson, 1997; Shaw, 2003; Fredman, 2007). I highlight blind spots in terms of embodiment in systemic literature and the mind/body duality that has emerged in other areas including research (Burkitt, 1999). In Chapter 6 the literature specific to metaphor is examined (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and connected to the literature relating to metaphor in family therapy.

The personal knowledge of this metaphor and the way it has been used, illustrates and advances an understanding of systemic practice and sense-making (Ellingson, 2009), offering a frame for systemic professionals and trainees to review in detail their practice and thus enhance their systemic practice with

families. This is detailed below under contributions criterion d). How I used this novel method is illustrated in the detailed portrayal of coordination in dialogue with Lorna, in Chapter 6, as I am witness to her efforts and passion as a concerned and caring mother. Amplifying her embodied listening towards her son becomes thickly and richly layered with her description as she responds to my appreciative and curious questions. The conversational scene becomes like a climbers' reconstruction or slow motion replay highlighting Lorna's key moves and responses as she coordinates with her son and amplifies her own noticing of these abilities as she unpacks her multiple moves. Attached to the conversational rope, I am reviewing my responses to Lorna's intentional and reflexively paced moves, as Lorna is positioned in a leading role as a teacher of listening for others.

### **c) The inquiry is innovative and bold**

The path this inquiry has followed is one that creates a way of entering the complexity and multiplicity of conversations. It embraces its messy, dynamic, unfinished nature through a process of analytical attention to my positioning as a systemic practitioner. Innovation in applying the notion of socially constructed therapeutic practices to our actual world (Shotter 1993) is illustrated in the way that I combine something from my personal world with wider fields. The emergent use of the rock climbing metaphor to conceptualise and offer a language and a detailed examination of my positioning, is a bold and exploratory research adventure that challenges dominant ways of seeing and doing practice inquiry. Dialogical, embodied conversations within communities are highlighted and innovative features emerging from its use create a language for aspects of therapeutic practice that are inherently difficult to articulate. This is elaborated further under the criterion addressing reflexivity. I combine concepts such as metaphoric systematicity (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Rossenblatt, 1994; Nadeau, 2006; Rossenblatt, 2008) to explore the illumination of aspects of practice that have been hidden, such as the systemic preparatory activities or systemic limbering introduced in Chapter 7, that enhanced my responsiveness in preparing to meet with Mohamed and the professional network in Chapters 8 and 9.

Orientation points are offered through the metaphor, to examine sensate and embodied reflexive positions and features within conversations; a user-friendly practice inquiry tool evolves as a systemic positioning 'climbing' frame for thinking about embodied, relational and reflexive practice. The innovative possibilities this opens up for extending learning about coordination with others in conversation and systemic positioning, is discussed under criterion d) and is examined in greater detail later in this chapter.

The use of such a metaphor in inquiry is bold because it presents intentional challenges and invitations to an audience of systemic practitioners, inquirers and those from wider research fields. An invitation to embrace multiply complex ecologies, to look for collaborative ways of doing inquiry, to elevate community voices, and to consider taken-for-granted ways of understanding systemic practice and inquiry away from realist notions of research and associated theories, language and assumptions are presented through this inquiry. It invites also an openness and curiosity towards embodied movement and performance features of systemic practice with a level of transparency. I open myself and aspects of my own practice to scrutiny, including my thinking, dialogue, questions, reflections, internal dialogue and outer responses as I coordinate with others. This may also be considered a bold move.

**d) The inquiry makes a substantive contribution to the field of systemic practice and systemic inquiry, to members of the public, other professionals, communities or organisations**

This inquiry makes a key contribution directly to families and professionals working in communities and often in complex and compelling circumstances. Most of the conversations in this inquiry took place following the death of a young person that created painful shockwaves within different parts of the community. The inquiry pays close attention to language, culture, and identity and how openings are created in forming new understandings about each other and opens new possibilities for relationships at difficult times and in complex and painful circumstances. It brings to light local expertise and qualities through dialogue articulated by Len in the professional group as ‘liberating’ in Chapter 9: ‘There is expertise all around us, I just have to open my eyes and invite it in.’ Encouraging a rigorous reflexive noticing of blind spots through the process of scrutiny of my own practice as a practitioner and inquirer, is significant for systemic and other professionals working in the field, highlighting the importance of attending to issues of social and cultural difference and diversity.

There is a shift happening within the systemic practice and inquiry field, and this thesis contributes to dialogical embodied reflexive research (Simon, 2011; Vedeler, 2011). To the qualitative research field, it offers a process of enrichment and understanding. Ellis (2004) and Etherington (2004) are researchers who are positioned inside the systems they are inquiring into and emphasise that research processes are embodied practices. I am positioned similarly through an auto-ethnographic account as my own case study in this inquiry. This is a very different metaphor that has a particular personal meaning for me and I have applied it to my practice and to help situate my inquiry journey, my feelings of tendency, my inner dialogue and my responses in coordination with those of others. This has expansive potential to help

towards a reflexive understanding of the nature and details of practice that have remained hidden and difficult to articulate. The reflexive contribution of this metaphor is expanded upon under criterion f) and g). It is directly applicable and useful to systemic training and leadership in enriching understanding of positioning and coordination with others in dialogue and with those involved in inquiry activities and processes. In Chapters 8 and 9, the challenges to coordination in the conversation with the professional group, are presented as ‘crux points’ and are illustrated in both the practice and inquiry and highlight a holding of tension points. In the dialogue in this particular case, I witness the tension points and challenges professionals had expressed as feeling overwhelmed by organisational goals.

It is reflective of similar tension points raised within this inquiry process for me, as I attempt to offer an alternative approach to hierarchical dominant ideologies and methods that favour certain types of knowledge and language over others (Kincheloe, 1997). In this case illustration of practice, I do so by responding in a way that listens and fits with the needs, concerns, qualities and knowledge within communities, and by unveiling resources that had remained hidden, unnoticed or unnamed. Professional blind spots are understood in a more enriching and expansive way through the use of the metaphors. Different people offered a variety of metaphors in the talk in this instance with useful practice implications for co-creating new meaning and possibilities for everyone in the professional group. Metaphors offered included: ‘I can’t see the wood for the trees’, being ‘in the thicket,’ ‘hitting an impasse’. These became rich entry points for joint exploration generating limitless curiosity and for taking positions of leading and following in turn. They also helped us all to talk and attend to values and beliefs that were often difficult to articulate or were not usually discussed. Similarly in inquiry, metaphor offers richness in keeping curiosity and embodiment alive. It also allows for new awareness, vision and relational opportunities to unfold enhancing relational artistry in both practice and inquiry.

Dominant ways of seeing and doing practice and inquiry are challenged through the use of the metaphor and by paying close attention to transformational features and mutual presence within conversations. *Being* becomes the focus in Chapter 1, for example, and a mutual presence with Joe as he grapples with his dilemma. This offers an early indication of the inquiry orientation as detail of; embodied self- and relational noticing, minute attention to embodied language and verbal and non-verbal noticing unfolds. A contribution to systemic reflexive and appreciative practice and inquiry is made through a sharing of my learning about coordination with others in conversation and systemic positioning. This comes through an extensive degree of microscopic attention, starting in Chapter 1 and peppered throughout each chapter thereafter, with vignettes of episodes within conversations that are full bodied. In Chapter 3, with Fatimah and other parents, I am moved to tears by others’ pain and tears. Close attention is given in the inquiry to

silent spaces that are packed with embodied richness; features within the dialogue that had remained hidden and taken for granted in systemic therapy. Much of the transformative learning and noticing for example, for Lorna and I in Chapter 6, takes place in the pauses and this leaves me in wonder.

#### **e) The inquiry is ethical**

Ethics have formed the foundation for both the inquiry process and practice activities. The self- and relational approach and activities in systemic inquiry overlap with those involved in systemic practice illustrated in Chapter 4. Practice and inquiry activities and processes acknowledge the dynamic evolving, relational and ethical particulars of each case that are lived in, moment by moment. Both as a practitioner and inquirer, this places me in special involvement with unique other people at a given moment in their lives. As an inquirer the choices I make in the episodes showcased in this thesis, are inherently ethical ones. For example in Chapter 3 there is an ethical dimension to this conversational episode; features of relational risk taking Mason (2005) and relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999), are illustrated as I examine my practice in a moment of uncertainty and I choose to share something from a personal context. Talking from a personal position whilst acting from within my professional context, I make connections as a daughter with a group of parents, to enable new connections for others. I drew on my connection to my father as a resource for others and with an answerability (Bakhtin, 1993) for others to ensure a respectful way of going on together. It became a connecting bridge for other mothers, aunts, and daughters, to consider relationships with education and the school community and to draw on multiple contexts in order to build existing relationships.

In relation to the inquiry process, ethical considerations have been considered with care and attention for all those who took part. My research project was approved by KCC Ethics Committee in December 2008; all those who took part were invited to participate and were given information before-hand, this was discussed and then followed by giving their consent. Within this process considerations were given to making these accounts public (see Appendix 1a, Information, and Appendix 1b, Consent). Given I had been part of a practice project over a period of 10 months involving those who took part in this inquiry, the processes of discussion around consent were key. All were informed of my particular interest in the inquiry including the fact that I was inquiring into my own practice. This was discussed and participants were comfortable about the focus being on my practice and about using features of conversations we had engaged in together. Particular features included my being powerfully moved almost to tears at times, as illustrated in Chapter 2, of uncertainty and not knowing in Chapter 3, and of feeling off-balance by

experiencing a potential rupture in conversation with professionals in Chapter 8. All practice comes under a high level of self-scrutiny and self-reflexivity and this is all part of ethics in practice.

As part of my reflections on practice I took detailed notes of these features, immediately after conversations, to capture the movement and feel of being in the conversational space with others. These notes and transcripts were shared. The possibility of tape recording, as one way of capturing the spoken text, was discussed with everyone but this was not something that the majority of participants wanted to use and so it was decided not to tape record. Although the detailed accounting after sessions was largely made by me, the inquiry design built in space for conversations about our conversations as illustrated in Chapters 1, 3, 6, 7 and 9. Some excerpts from these conversations are included. The content of my notes included outer dialogue, observations about pauses and poignant points in conversation that were shared very soon afterwards with participants in follow-up sessions. Some rich and interesting feedback reflections came from these conversations. Mohamed in Chapter 7, for example, chose his most interesting aspect of our conversation as being the point that he described his experience as ‘seeing red’. His feedback was that the dialogue that followed was for him experienced as ‘being in the zone’.

Particular attention was paid to Mohamed both in the practice and the inquiry process as he was the youngest of all those who participated. The way that he was ‘presented’ to me by a member of the school staff, alerted me to the need to check he was making a fully informed choice in his participation in our conversations and in the inquiry. He was invited to bring a responsible adult of his choice with him; he chose his uncle to attend with him as his support in follow-up conversations and in going through the transcripts and feedback together.

Areas of mutual attention were discussed in follow-up sessions with all those involved, prompted by sharing of aspects of my inner dialogue that I had noted, and others were invited to share their thoughts and feelings in our discussion about non-verbal responses. Both Fatimah and Dounia in Chapter 2 highlighted that a key moment for them was when they both felt tearful and noticed a tear welling in the corner of my eye at the same time. This feedback moved me again as Dounia commented ‘That told me that it mattered to you, you got it, you were more than someone who had a professional duty to be there’. It would have been really interesting in the inquiry to have expanded upon my embodied responses to others and to elaborate on their responses and so on, in our conversations and also to include what was striking or moving or unbalancing for those who took part. It would have enriched the inquiry to include others’ micro-moves, how they may have been moved or experienced being in coordination or feeling unbalanced or on uncertain ground in conversation also. It would, however, have created a different way

of going on in the research, and the inquiry would have followed a different focus. I am wondering at this stage, how I could have mirrored the practice more by ensuring space for hesitation within the inquiry, as this also would have enhanced the inquiry.

I am ethically responsible within the unique act (Bender, 1998) and this includes the act of writing in a way that privileges evocative over\_mechanical and cognitive contemplations. The way I have written this thesis is covered under criterion k).

In discussing preferences about how material was to be presented with all those involved, strong expressions were offered by some who said they did not want their words to be ‘boxed in’. Elaborating on this, the majority of those who fed back specifically stated a preference for the text to be left open ‘like in a book’. I had experimented with boxed pieces of transcript to highlight features of dialogue highlighted themes , however this made me rethink, and through a process of negotiation and respect for their feedback, this thesis has come to be presented in its current form without boxed transcripts. I would have liked to have explored other ways of presenting and sharing accounts and to invite more interest in the process by incorporating other creative means through the use of art poetry and music, for example, in inquiry. Building this creative diversity into the inquiry with more space to explore and amplify others’ descriptions and responses, would have enriched this in a relationally ethical way. There was not an opportunity to do 360-degree feedback in its final version because of the time it took to complete the thesis, and that is a limitation. However, all those who were involved, were given opportunities to meet with me throughout, for follow-up support and I invited ongoing inquiry, transparency and discussion about all parts of the process.

#### **f) The inquiry demonstrates rigour**

Rigour overlaps into ethics and includes a rigorous application to ethical processes in practice and inquiry as detailed under the above section. There is also a reflexive rigour that is addressed under criterion g) covering reflexivity in the inquiry. Tracy’s (2010) rich abundance and complexity is illustrated in all vignettes within this inquiry and these are rich in their complexity and multiplicity. It includes what may be considered as my personal ‘raw data’. Whilst traditional language and notions of ‘data’, ‘outcome’ and ‘results’ do not fit this particular inquiry, my unique role as inquirer and participant , may be seen as being an instrument of ‘data collection’ and the audit trail or ‘data’ therefore, are the conversations themselves. An acknowledgement of my inside participant position is central, therefore, and involvement is valued over distance. I employ multiple qualitative strategies as my own case study including my



reflections and face-to-face follow-ups with individuals and groups. This included invitations to talk with those who were with me in dialogue, about our experience of talking together. This is illustrated in chapter one; Joe described things becoming clearer together and this was something that I experienced and shared with Joe too. In the multiple member conversations with parents in Chapter 2 the quality of listening was described by Fatimah as becoming infectious and this feedback too was infectious for all of us who were part of that dialogue and gave new hope for all those in that experience, offering hopeful ways of going on together.

Inquiry processes are generated from a variety of theoretical and practice constructs from the systemic, embodied, dialogical and qualitative research literature detailed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Inquiry as a philosophically informed activity that understands social worlds and relationships between people as an ongoing activity, is conducted by and with human beings. Social construction and relational construction (McNamee and Hosking (2012), as a meta-theoretical inquiry base, detailed in Chapter 4, provides ways of dealing with concerns about how I talk about inquiry as a process in which I am involved. I apply with rigour systemic ideas about therapeutic processes, and I have attempted to replicate these in the inquiry, particularly through the use of the metaphor. I draw on dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981), embodied literature (Burkitt, 1999) and metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) as a backdrop against which to introduce the rock climbing metaphor as an embodied reflexive tool. I include my reflections, self- and relationally reflexive inner dialogue and outer moves as I coordinate with others. Noting my sensate ‘felt sense’ (Gendlin, 1997; 2003) I reflect on how I address ongoing biases, decisions and dilemmas. Evidenced in this inquiry is a rigorous observation and deconstruction of living moments, noticing minute and subtle embodied detail. Pauses, for example, are paid close attention to with Joe in Chapter 1, Fatimah in Chapter 2 and Lorna in Chapter 6, and these are packed with embodied richness of; breathing, attention to how words are uttered, uncertainty, abilities to stir, to touch and be touched. Thorough notes detailing pauses, tone, pace and rhythm, and the verbal and non-verbal movement in the dialogue were part of my inquiry process, and are demonstrated in, for example, the attention paid to moments of discomfort in Chapter 8 initially triggered by the term ‘professional expert’ in the professional network meeting, and the excitement and ignition at the connection point of ‘seeing red’ with Mohamed in Chapter 7. They create different ways of going on together in dialogue.

Within this inquiry process, I have been aware of the strong pull of dominant discourses around research processes and its associated language. There is a danger of this becoming inherent, and I demonstrate my rigorous attempt to resist this pull through the use of the metaphor and through the writing. Rigour is demonstrated in the exploration of how reflexive practice looks and feels with its pulls and in-the-moment

shifts; in how this subsequently moves me in different directions and how I am reflexively drawn and informed in those moments. Listening and connecting to Fatimah's story as a concerned aunt, for example, I transparently question myself and my ongoing responses in the moment with ethically informed considerations; this is part of a reflexive process. I have expanded an exploration into reflexivity in this inquiry through the vivid imagery of positions and movement offered through the use of the rock climbing metaphor. Its reflexive practice and inquiry implications are far-reaching. To experienced systemic practitioners trainees and inquirers it offers a new language that extends our talk, exploration and understanding about subtle features of systemic practice that are often difficult to articulate. There are transgressions of the inquiry process and the writing, and reflecting on this metaphor further, has offered multiple reflexive layers to practice questions. Many of these are transferable to systemic practice inquiry considerations and are covered in the next section.

Rigour is involved in ensuring an evocative style of writing and self-scrutiny in the way practice is portrayed. Examined further under the criteria attending to reflexivity, the process of writing, rewriting and reading can also be considered a form of reflexive inquiry, as demonstrated below.

#### **g) The inquiry shows reflexivity**

The reflexive rigour involved in this sort of research is formidable; the reflection and reflexivity necessary to address ongoing biases, decisions and dilemmas are all part of a relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999). Self- and relational awareness, sensitivity and awareness of alternative frames, multiple perceptions and stories, including those from my multiple contexts as illustrated in Chapter 3, are always framed by assumptions that are to be tested, challenged and transformed in the process of becoming. This is demonstrated in the example presented in Chapter 3 from what seemed a random sensate moment, in this case the smell of pipe tobacco that drew me close to the memory of my father, and became a rich resource in generating other connections for parents from diverse cultural groups. I highlight tentative reflexive steps and ethically informed guesses about sharing personal connections from my family script and cultural context.

One of the most innovative areas of reflexivity in my inquiry is the way I have used the metaphor of rock climbing as a reinforcing reflexive tool that enriches features of my presence as a systemic practitioner and systemic practice inquirer. As a reflexive practice tool it has provided a self and relationally reflexive frame, offering me safe enough parameters and multiple vantage points to explore; fragilities and discomforts, errors of judgement and uncoordinated moves within my own practice. This is evidenced in

Chapters 8 and 9 as I explore sensate moments of vulnerability, discomfort and potential ruptures. By placing reflexive practice processes under the spotlight those features hidden from view or difficult to speak about are illuminated and can be expressed; being ‘thrown off balance’ in Chapter 8, and my initial discomfort at being introduced to the multi-professional network as a ‘professional expert’ for example. This embodied reflexive frame acts as an additional way of exploring ways of deepening understanding about reflexivity in the midst of complexity. I elaborate more on reflexivity in the next section h) from a position of being alongside others in conversation and the reflexive isomorphic processes that form part of that experience.

The use of this metaphor in particular has helped me as an inquirer throughout this inquiry, to position away from strong professional and academic discourses and to remain reflexive. This allows for freedom from; academic discourses, professional language and systemic therapeutic language that each has its own jargon. The use of this metaphor offers a transgression and set within the field of systemic practice, it becomes a reflexive inquiry tool offering a range of multiple positions and considerations for reflexive practice and inquiry. Useful questions within this frame may include: ‘Does this feel stable/balanced? What would help regain balance? What makes for a safe and/or unstable ledge? And for whom? How do we move off from dangerously safe ledges to embrace uncertainty? How do we make it safe enough for self and others to do this? How do we move between tensions presented and through crux points? How do we navigate through this complex ecology in collaboration and move on from here with others? What movement/question will enable others to move on? How do we move out of our comfort zone to enable more freedom and movement for others? How tight or slack a rope do we need to ensure as a lead climber/therapist /inquirer, moment-by-moment respect for difference, diversity and freedom? How might it be to pause here for a moment? What would that open up or close down, and for whom? How do we make use of this pause for noticing self and other reflection? Where are the tension points? Where are our blind spots? How do we attend to these?’ These are just a few self- and relationally reflexive questions that have come from this inquiry offering a loose guide of inner and outer moves as reflexive stepping stones, handholds and footholds for scaffolding self- and relational stances and positions.

The process of writing this thesis and remembering has also stirred emotional responses for me and I have used writing as a form of reflexive inquiry (Richardson, 1994; 2000). I hope that this generates reflexive space for the reader also to make up their own meaning alongside my reflections. As a reflexive inquirer participant (Etherington, 2004) I have attempted to amplify the voices of inquiry participants over mine throughout the text and have been transparent about my biases, preferences and attachments from

practice, research, personal and professional contexts using systemic tools to do so, as documented in Chapter 3.

**h) The inquiry demonstrates that as a researcher I talk from lived experience and practice relationships rather than ‘about’ others**

I speak in the first person and include multiple aspects of my personal world, writing with transparency and in an open manner, adding sensate embodied descriptions of the movement, shape, colour, and smell of being in the relational dynamic. The level of noticing is demonstrated in each of the case vignettes, with comments on the breath, the pause, eye and facial expressions and outer and inner processes, as I try to coordinate with the interests of others. The reader is invited into the detail about my presence as a researcher including; inner and outer dialogue, thoughts in progress, noticings, feelings, the concrete and the transient. I include moments of meaningfulness that arise out of the random; the smell of pipe tobacco in Chapter 3, for example, illustrates the multiple positions I occupy. This comes from an embodied, dialogical orientation as a systemic practitioner, therapist, trainer and inquirer.

Inquiry and the writing process from this position is involved and unfolding, and I am ethically positioned to create movements in my writing from within practice that have engaged me and involve those with whom I have collaborated. This process also invites the reader to be moved, connected and to generate new and different reflections connected to their direct experience. I demonstrate transparency and inclusion within the writing and include details of my embodied sense, my inner dialogue, feelings and thoughts in process and reflections in exploring my coordination and positioning in the dynamic of dialogue with others. I include physical responses, facial and bodily gestures, the unspoken and spoken, my inner dialogue and outer responses in unfolding happenings of conversation. Being in the event is lived through and not observed from afar where we continuously check, adjust, and work to the feedback of our responses within relationships, not solve the problem or apportion blame. This is illustrated particularly in Chapters 8 and 9 as I facilitate the professional group away from an ‘aboutness’ type of talk and towards a ‘with-ness’ (Shotter, 2011) of continuous engagement. Each practice vignette demonstrates that all of us involved in conversation are co-creators of each act.

Isomorphic processes and reflexivity in relationships are demonstrated; in Chapter 1. I am moved by Joe’s embodied description of ‘being there’ for others at a tragic time, and my being there for Joe in our dialogue. I am changed by Lorna’s wisdom as a mother as I witness ‘in wonder’ her description of bracing herself to let go, and trust the space to listen to her son in Chapter 6. I am poised in a similar way

as I learn to trust the space of the pause, resisting acting on my systemic enthusiasm to interject with a question or a cluster of systemic questions that come to mind in the moment. Mohamed became an inquirer to the process in our talk in Chapter 7, as he described the point of connection and coordination in our moves together as ‘being in the zone’. Having worked through the process of trying to coordinate and connect to a hook factor of *seeing red* it subsequently led to a flow of dialogue. This level of relational reflexivity led to new learning for Mohamed and I, enriching his understanding, mine and also the staff group in terms of gaining an appreciation of how he was able to calm himself when overwhelmed by powerful feelings. Such attention to the particulars of each situation, and the special involvement with each unique act with others at any given moment in their lives, is illustrated throughout by participating in the ‘communion with the historical event of being’ (Bakhtin, 1993).

**i) The inquiry shows a thoughtful consideration of power relations, differences in lived experience, belonging and identity and how these matters play out in both the area of professional practice inquiry and how research relationships are demonstrated in the research**

Sensitivity to ethics and the social GGRRAAACCCEEEESSS (Roper- Hall in Burnham 1992), include an awareness to power differentials and how power relationships are played out in the practice and inquiry. I critique objective knowledge in chapters two and three and the inevitability of subjectivity (Leppington, 2004; Hedges, 2005; Gergen, 2008) in both practice and inquiry. In Chapter 8 I demonstrate how this plays out for me, as an initial resistance to my introduction to the professional network group as a ‘professional expert’, a ‘knower’ privileged over local knowledge and lived experience. I challenge this by systemic questioning and repositioning to enable other professionals to amplify the qualities, resources, knowledge and knowhow of families within the neighbourhood. Krause (2002) describes the dangers presented by the variously constructed dispositions and instruments of power. This connects to a notion introduced in Chapter 8 through the rock climbing metaphor, of being on a dangerously safe ledge, illustrated in the early part of the dialogue with the multi-agency network meeting. There was a ‘stuck’ and dominant narrative embedded in some of the professionals in the all-white professional group, ‘about’ young people and their families. My immediate embodied resistance to the language used, and how a shift is then facilitated from this ledge, is examined. The movement towards acknowledging the impact of the language, and bringing diversity and multiplicity of the different contexts into the frame, created a difference for talking from lived experience whilst appreciating other’s local and lived knowledge. It created more appreciation of the complexity through the more personal lenses of being a mother, father, or other intimately concerned members of the community. Openings were created through taking

alternative positions to the notion of ‘expertise’ and power and this created a creative, curious and different movement of positions within the professional group as I also repositioned around the notion of expertise. Reciprocal interconnections began to emerge moving away from “professional talk and more towards an appreciation of the vast pool of knowledge in the lived experiences of young people and their families that had been previously unseen.

The systemic preparation, that I call *systemic limbering* in Chapter 7 as I meet with Mohamed, highlights an awareness, sensitivity and attention to issues of social difference and diversity. An attuned alertness to potential blind spots, especially given the multiple contextual differences in our lived experiences of gender, race, culture, age, faith, family, and education, became apparent in this limbering preparation process. Ethical processes including support, in the case of Mohamed, especially given his age, has been detailed in the ethics section.

#### **j) The inquiry shows transformation in the researcher’s thinking and practice**

When I started the doctoral journey there were many different paths ahead, and I had not anticipated that I would have the courage to see the rock climbing metaphor through as an inquiry tool. I did not intend to write about what happened as an account as such, but I have wanted to create something that resonates with the ‘felt sense’ (Gendlin, 1997; 2003) and the feelings of people with whom I have been involved. I hope that they as readers in turn, by reading, will recognise what I have written and feel energised.

I did not know that through the use of the metaphor other illuminations of systemic practice would become crystallised; I learnt a lot through its use about reflexive movements going on moment by moment in conversation. Attention to the micro-moves, have been especially useful and has made me a more mindful practitioner and climber and more attentive in what and how I am doing. The language that has emerged, has enabled and extended my repertoire and understanding of systemic positioning and I am more attuned to and connect with the metaphors others offer as a way of extending learning about practice. I have learned to reflect more on moves I take for granted and perform almost without thinking. Pearce (1989) talks about unlearning to be able to embody, and to some extent that is what I have learned to do in this inquiry. I realised I had skills and observations that I was unaware of. These became apparent through the process of inquiry, and I am now able to frame systemic practice in creative and expansive ways such as; the systemic limbering to enter dialogue, the crux points, the tension points, being poised to move off or to be still. These are as much part of systemic practice as they are of climbing. They are teachable and transferable and are a contribution to the field of systemic therapy, practice and inquiry.

I have been transformed by the writing process within inquiry; the offering of my thoughts whilst encouraging reflecting spaces in and between the dialogical texts, were attempts to offer non-fixed, generative spaces for the reader to make connections (and disconnections), and this has created ongoing reflective space for me also, as I have read back on the texts with new questions. This has developed my ongoing curiosity and is very exciting as I continue to learn from every conversation I have been involved in. This has been transformative in terms of the creation of new learning and as I become more equipped with poise, to embrace uncertainty. I have been changed by this whole process and I am a more attuned practitioner and climber, therapist and inquirer

#### **k) The presentation of the research has aesthetic merit**

Aesthetic merit is demonstrated through the artistic and creative storytelling; I have tried to make a story of my work, allowing a literary use of metaphor to paint pictures both of practice and the participation of movement. I also use the metaphor to take the reader into another domain that looks at the whole, living, full-bodied and metaphoric experience. It shifts the reader, and I, as the inquirer, into a particularly reflexive aesthetic space. Thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973b, 2000) are offered as I try to tell these stories well; sharing a lot of what was happening through detailed description and transparent reflections. I show inner and outer dialogue, tension points and multiple features of embodied dialogue. The reader and all those involved in the inquiry, are kept in mind at all times as each story is set in their unique contexts.

Detailed pictures in the movement of each episode are described and these are moving, gripping and compelling. In particular I have tried to show life on the rock face and the full-bodied nature of practice. I have written in the first person and in a narrative style to bring a pictorial account of life on the rock face and to enable a movement of the reader to a different place. This way of writing to the reflexive space, showing my reflections in movement and through the writing, is a form of inquiry. It shows how my thinking and practice change both in the moment in practice and also as I reflect on the life of the practice, while allowing creative space for the reader. It offers a space to connect with the pain, the joy, the contemplation in the free space and reflective space of the pause in practice, in the writing and in the inquiry. It is presented in a way that enables the reader to make their own connections with their own and others' stories and their own practice. This is with the intention of generating new noticing, observing the movement, the shape, the colour and flow of what Bakhtin (1981) described as part of the living world.

## **Summary and Choice of this Inquiry and What it has Shown**

I have illuminated my movements and positioning as a systemic practitioner, with others, using an embodied reflexive lens through the use of an embodied metaphor of rock climbing. This has taken the form of an autoethnographic account, and I consider the implications of this inquiry for both practice and inquiry later in this chapter. The dialogue portrayed in each of the conversations with individuals and groups is drawn from within unique contexts within community settings. Each conversational encounter features a living poetics in the talk that stems from being in the life of the experience; people talk in embodied, poetic ways. This inquiry has attempted to capture some of the life of my inner dialogue and external moves as I am influenced and influence others in the living, dynamic emergent and open nature of practice. It has required me to step off a ledge of some preconceived ideas that I had about inquiry and it has been with some trepidation and tentativeness that I embarked upon a route not previously taken with the introduction of the metaphor of the climb as an embodied, reflexive, inquiry tool.

I have explored the possibilities for openings and consider some of the constraints of using this particular metaphor in wider professional and non-professional contexts. Applications of an embodied reflexive lens extend far beyond the field of therapy and systemic practice and into everyday conversations, and I reflect on the wide extent of its usefulness in the way that it has evolved in this inquiry and point to recommendations for future consideration.

## **Illuminating an Embodied Reflexive Orientation in Inquiry**

An embodied reflexive orientation in inquiry offers a way to explore the detail of participation with others in dialogue as embodied persons participating with ‘eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit’ (Bakhtin, 1984, p.293) in verbal and non-verbal movement. This is applicable and relevant in all of my conversational encounters with others in therapeutic contexts, professional network meetings, group sessions and individual conversations with professionals and non-professionals, and also in the context of systemic supervision. In all of these contexts I am engaged as an embodied being with other embodied beings. The multiply complex and diverse ecology immediately highlights my being in the domain of not knowing,



and I have drawn heavily on the sensitive insights into ‘not knowing’ cited in the literature (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992) that have helped balance me in the uncertainty, ambiguity, and unpredictable and unexpected nature of being with others in conversational spaces. I catalogue some of the features that have come to light under the heading of inquiry ‘outcomes’.

## **How I Have met Post-Doctorate Systemic Practice Expectations of Research**

I place myself as writing a case study from a first-person position. ‘[T]he conduct of social life is based on a right we assign to first-person activities within this, to which I am responsible with others. All valid forms of inquiry are based on such a right’ (Shotter, 1984, p.15). This claims a living validity, therefore, from the opportunity it has created to learn from within the experience rather than about the experience of others (Shotter, 2010; 2011). Inquiry from within practice is distinctly different to other forms of research; given that it is about the dynamic, complex and open-ended multiplicity of experience, different ways of accounting for this are required.

Shotter summarises this succinctly: ‘the rights, duties, privileges and obligations of the different “persons” in everyday social life are such as to give rise to two different kinds of accounting: (1) that from within the flow of action, when one clarifies one’s actions as a first-person to a second-person in some way by further action ...’ (1984, p.15).

This inquiry falls within this frame, placing people as living, bodily, spontaneous, expressive and responsive to the otherness of the other (Shotter, 1975; 1993a; 1993b; 2010).

From this particular perspective to inquiry I have been driven to find more expressive means within the process of inquiry itself to explore more expansively self- and relational reflexivity. It has led me to search in more creative corners for varied and meaningful ways to capture living embodied components of interactions in conversations and my positioning within that context.

## **Overall Review of Research Journey**

As I am reaching a closing point to this inquiry, I am reminded of some of my early struggles on the doctoral journey with my doctoral peers and tutors at Kensington Consultation Centre (KCC). This was

where that vision started for the systemic practice doctorate. ‘There is a field’ set out a different set of anticipations as we entered the process. Having a sense of not knowing what a systemic doctorate looked like, or what was ahead in inquiry, required a trust in the process and a trust in the systemic resources that have served me so well as a practitioner. I have trusted an inquiry space that is shaped and guided by the direct experience of practice and have required some risk-taking through an exploration of embodied reflexivity with the metaphor of rock climbing. This is used as one inquiry tool among others, and it has taken me into areas of my practice I had not previously entered into in such detail. The challenge of how this may be seen by a wider research community has been a risk worth taking when following this different route. I would even go as far as to say it has been necessary to take risks in order to create a space for the consideration of embodied reflexive inquiry, a ‘bodyset’ to join some well-established mindsets of inquiry. The personal embodied reflexive nature of the inquiry from within my own practice also heightens the risk-taking, in my view, and is discussed further below.

To avoid any potential confusion about the research genre of this inquiry, the language of inquiry is preferred to that of research and philosophy over method. The use of a particular metaphor of rock climbing has been used as an inquiry tool alongside others.

### **Achievements: Writing and Workshops**

During the course of the doctoral journey I have been involved in other pieces of writing, some published and some unpublished. I have attended workshops and presented at conferences and I am currently involved in running a series of workshops outlined in the section ‘A climbing frame for inquiring into embodied reflexive practices’, featured later in this chapter, which stems specifically from this inquiry. While the different pieces of writing are not all directly related to this inquiry they have been an integral part of my overall journey and have had a recursive influence in terms of how I am invited into different conversations and how I enter these conversations. These contexts and interests also inform my passion for seeking out accessible forms of inquiry and promoting practices that reach out in different ways. These include making systemic practice more accessible within communities, especially for those who, for whatever reason, choose not to use therapeutic services or find that these do not fit. Recursively I incorporate a systemic approach alongside other approaches and practices as a way of being flexible and responsive to the needs of communities as they arise. A systemic influence is apparent in each of my published and unpublished writings including the articles, book and book chapters indicated in Chapter 1.

## **Ongoing Achievements: Embodied Reflexive Workshops and Teaching Tools Offering a way to Extend Systemic Practice**

This inquiry, with its consideration of embodied reflexivity through metaphor, offers a flexible and open framework for systemic teaching and supervision contexts. It also offers a springboard from which to explore and deconstruct embodied reflexive features of conversation beyond the systemic field, and contributes to other professional practices that involve working with people in different capacities. Indeed, I make use of this embodied frame to consider my systemic positioning in my everyday practice with young people and their families, and parents and young people have indicated these strategies are useful for working through some complex issues. It has applications in terms of exploring hidden resources through embodied reflexive noticing and also through the metaphors more generally offered within conversation. Doctoral students and trainees have fed back the usefulness of the close attention offered by different features within this inquiry, including positioning, poise, embodied reflexivity and sequencing moves. The frame that the embodied metaphor of rock climbing offers in terms of considering multiple positions as we attempt to coordinate with others, can be used in more or less structured ways, and I am using it in different contexts of systemic practice and therapy within child and adolescent mental health and community practices, systemic supervision and training, consultations and workshops with social workers and foster carers, school staff, youth, community and youth offending team professionals. The embodied reflexive features facilitated within this frame means its application is wide because it is designed to enhance engagement processes that are inherently relational and dialogical, and offers a way into micro-features of engagement as sensate, reflexive beings.

I offer a loose framework for consideration that is discussed later in this chapter, and give a sense of some of the different areas and types of questions inviting attention within the frame. This stems from an ongoing inquiry position within the livingness of practice that is both accountable and answerable. This is a framework to explore the micro-features of what it means to be an embodied reflexive systemic practitioner, and one of the main ‘outcomes’ from this inquiry is a frame I am already sharing with different groups and individuals, colleagues in multidisciplinary teams, my own child and adolescent mental health teams and with families.

The embodied reflexive frame has various uses:

- As a metaphor to explore and extend self- and relational reflexivity

- To encourage multiple position-taking
- To illuminate potential blind spots
- To offer rigour in examining embodiment in our interactions in conversational encounters
- To provide a useful systemic orientation to practice and inquiry.

Within this embodied frame some orientation points include:

- Systemic limbering: getting into readiness in a systemic limbering up space as we prepare for conversational encounters.
- The poise: attending to micro-details of the still points in conversation and giving attention to our internal dialogue, for example in the pause and micro-moves.
- Crux points: considering how to move through crux points, which may be very varied, and being reflexive about informing contexts. This is about exploring the tension points and felt senses at points indicated by utterances such as ‘feeling stuck’, ‘not knowing what to do or how to go on’ as described by different professionals in Chapters 8 and 9.
- Moving from safe ledges: exploring what these safe ledges are made up of, including assumptions, biases and prejudices, and encouraging a move from comfort zones of practice.
- The flow: exploring how we reach a point of movement in conversation that is balanced, harmonious and in coordination with each other. The flow that emerges in conversation with Mohamed in Chapter 7 is an example of this. It illustrates the point at which something changes, the grab factor or hook factor when a connection is made between Mohamed and me through colour. In Mohamed’s words there is a sudden ‘click’, a connection followed by flow. The whole of this process can be deconstructed within this frame.
- Sequencing moves: offering a way of exploring the multitude of positions we take in moment-by-moment frames within interaction. This includes inner dialogue and outer moves. The frame that becomes available within sequencing moves is detailed later in this chapter, and is the frame I use and modify within my embodied reflexive workshops.

These orientation points enable us to enter into reflexive embodied features of conversation, encouraging a collective learning through experience about embodied reflexive practice and inquiry. This frame is complemented by CMM, the atomic model to identify different points or utterances and to reflect on implicative forces, and contextual forces and embodied micro-features within that, and ways in to create a shift. The outline of the embodied reflexive workshop is expanded upon towards the end of this chapter under the heading ‘A climbing frame for inquiring into embodied reflexive practices’.

## **Keeping my Focus in this Inquiry as ‘a Climbing Trek’ in Uncharted Places and the Significant Questions Raised**

In many ways my writings in other areas highlights my need to maintain a focus on this inquiry journey and the need to move into uncharted areas and to remain outside a comfort zone (Wilson, 2007). I am curious about the fact that I have not presented publicly to larger audiences about this inquiry although I have a huge commitment to doing something in inquiry. I reflect on the potential risk involved among my professional peers, as moving into areas that shine a bold spotlight onto the ways I practice becomes very exposing. Public showing and sharing, and embodied reflexive rigour and scrutiny, are bound to turn a bright light on my biases, assumptions, professional and personal blind spots. Exposure and professional vulnerability come with this process. However, I am at a stage now, as I conclude this inquiry, to go public about the need to step off a professional and inquiry ledge and challenge existing and established activities. I have not attempted to play safe in this inquiry, nor climb a route that has been climbed many times before. Instead I have wanted to encourage and model this tenuous, risky but essential orientation, and model a step off a safe ledge and question areas of practice, the blind spots in practices and the evidence biases that continue to remain unexplored and keep different community groups invisible. The concept of therapy itself comes under scrutiny, and there is a need within my practice, in the context of therapy, to question how I am doing inclusive and collaborative practice and how I question existing structures and language that construct constraining and labelling narratives about people. These are big questions that reverberate through many different levels and strands of the services and organisations of which I am part. This inquiry inevitably challenges some existing hierarchical ideas of knowledge and knowing through an embodied reflexive lens.

I have metaphorically explored the feel of an unpolished, raw rock face, its contours and unique features, to get to know my way around, and this has been my sense of the process of feeling around in this inquiry. Unexpectedly, writing has also been a feature of this exploration as I have entered the micro-detail of my internal dialogue and external moves within the dynamic flow of dialogue. In the process of this exploration of embodied reflexivity a rigorous scrutiny has been applied to self and other accountability, emphasising the embodied performance aspect of self- and relational reflexivity and adding rigour to my systemic positioning as a practitioner.

## **The Metaphor of the Climb: A Key Part of the Inquiry Journey that Highlights my Personal Positioning within Inquiry and Illuminates Areas of Practice**

This particular metaphor has a personal significance, illuminating features of a first-person orientation by shining a light on places I had not noticed in such detail before. It has required an orientation that suggests a degree of knowing my way around the metaphor, hence the significance of having a personal connection and meaning so as to extend its exploratory capacity. It has inevitably led me to scrutinise aspects of my practice that I had taken for granted and uncover my practice blind spots. There are some obvious constraints to this metaphor, however, in terms of its exclusivity and personal significance. The fact that it may be unfamiliar to many readers, who may subsequently struggle to connect with the ideas, find it uncomfortable to follow or find its repeated use tiresome, is acknowledged as a possible constraint. However it is not so much the climb in its literal sense that has been so valuable (although I have found it very insightful), but the transferable ideas and insights generated in relation to my own practice and systemic practice more generally that have grabbed my attention. The detail that becomes apparent through the use of the metaphor, the fresh perspectives on interactions it offers and its useful applications to systemic practice as an embodied dynamic relational activity tool outweigh these constraints. It offers flexibility as a possible inquiry tool that can meet the multi-complex, ever-changing, open-ended and unfinished challenges within practice encounters. It is, however, only one possible inquiry tool amongst others, and one that fits with inquiry deriving from my own lived experience as one inside the flow and feel of the action rather than a detached outsider looking in and accounting.

## **Review of Methodologies and Routes Not Taken**

Part of my ecology is my way of writing, and although there is no space to develop this point further in this thesis I have become increasingly interested in the generative reflexive process of writing. The questions I have grappled with in the process of writing include how to account for something that is alive and dynamic in a text. The autoethnographic manner in which I have written this thesis attempts to address this challenge; it comes from a particular research genre discussed above and differs significantly from intellectually constructed accounts. Just as anthropologists believe that we can be better enlightened by the rich stories, narratives and experiences told by real people rather than the scientific findings reported by researchers, this thesis focuses on moments within lived stories and narratives. My embodied being in these moments, as I look, listen, sense and make sense with others in conversation, shows my systemic positioning in this process as different positions are taken throughout.

## **Review of Inquiry Question**

- How can the metaphor of rock climbing enhance an understanding of systemic positioning?

This question guided me to an interesting exploration of embodied reflexive areas and details of my practice. However, one critique would be that I have been too wedded to this particular metaphor, privileging reflexively embodied over relationally embodied reflexivity, and I consider this a weakness in this inquiry. I am left wondering whether, for example, the metaphor of dance, the movements and relational focus could have provided a greater attention and more relationally reflexive scope in inquiry into systemic practice. At this stage I am left with the question of how to move within/from the metaphor of a climb to show relationality and reflexivity.

## **Inquiry Outcomes**

The unique point emerging from this inquiry is the extent to which the metaphor of the climb illuminates self- and relational reflexivity in the context of conversations I am in as a systemic practitioner. An emphasis on my embodied being in the practice has led me to introduce a living, breathing, bodily metaphor to capture lived moments of experience within practice with others. This, in my view, has been an outcome that has achieved a sense of the flow of the lived experience without reducing the chaos, complexity, or the ebbs and flows of this experience.

As an additional and complementary inquiry tool, the climbing metaphor is enabling and respectful of the differences and diversity we all bring to conversations. An embodied reflexive inquiry frame emerges as a potential vehicle for entering the multiply complex ecology of community, group and individual practices and our systemic positioning within these contexts. Micro-features come to light, as evidenced in sequencing moves, the poise, and the flow through the application of the metaphor of the climb. It illuminates what it means to be an embodied reflexive systemic practitioner, as moments unfold with others in the conversational space.

Whenever you speak, you define a character for yourself and for at least one other – your audience – and make a community at least between the two of you; and you do this in a language that is of necessity provided to you by others and modified in your use of it (White, 1986, p.xi).

Emerging questions may also be seen as outcomes; they come into view with an emphasis on embodiment and the sensate experience of being with others in conversation. What is your sense of this experience of talking in this way? If you could picture an image or a metaphor, what would it look like or feel like? How might we enter and explore that together to see what new things come to light? Who could be a resource for you in joining and finding a way through? How would you sense this and how would others know there was a different feel of the experience for you?

This is elaborated further under the section on contributions. The responses to these questions led to different kinds of outcomes and a very unique and fruitful set of resources that emerged from exploring the metaphors that different people offered. They also generated different position-taking as the metaphor was steered by the person offering the metaphor and I provided the fuel with questions as I joined the space and shone the systemic torch in concealed places. Two examples of offerings of metaphor were Lorna's 'being braced', describing in graphic detail the features of 'holding back' to create a listening space for her son, and Mohamed's hidden knowledge showing how he could exercise control in the midst of 'waves' of anger. This shed a light, through his vivid knowing of colour and his narrative of 'just seeing red', and was reconstructed through the different possibilities of other colours that emerged as alternative resources to him in these moments of feeling angry.

There appears to be a limitless resourcefulness in the sharing of and entering into different metaphors, and a collective learning that opens up within this space as demonstrated in each of the conversations, including the professional network meeting as we moved through the impasse's 'stuck points' and 'thicket' together. A collective outcome emerged from these parts of the conversation in that we are all learning together. There was something about going with the flow in the engagement and energy ignited through the use of metaphor. It appears to highlight metaphor as a unique and novel way of relating that also revealed embodied sensate areas that were difficult to articulate. It became a leveraging point to open and enter a space of inquiry within conversations together and seemed to resonate and shine a light in dark corners. The general significance of metaphor as a connecting and engaging creative force for collective learning within dialogue and the many applications of metaphor are detailed more in the section on applications and use.

Embodied reflexive inquiry acknowledges practice as being fully embodied; it introduces into the grammar 'bodyful' as well as mindful, thus creating embodied considerations and anticipations for practice and inquiry.



The generative creative and reflexive outcome from the process of writing is also included in this section, as there is something ‘that happens’ in the process of writing, reflecting, reflecting on the writing, rewriting and taking different positions on reflections as they appear in print, that I have not fully conceptualised and made sense of. The writing process itself has emerged as an unexpected reflexive inquiry tool. I am interested in the different versions I have written, and the different embodied felt sense I have had at times of being moved and stirred as I am reminded of moments of dialogue. This also applies to the frustration I experience as I struggle to find words to describe embodied experience. I have come to embrace the poetics of everyday conversations and have represented this thesis as uncategorised, not ‘boxed in’ or set in overly structured words.

An outcome from this inquiry is also the learning from the process, which is detailed under personal professional learning.

## **Contributions**

### **Embodied Reflexive Inquiry in Everyday Conversations to Effect Change**

Embodied reflexive inquiry offers a way into a practice understanding of systemic positioning within the detail of episodes of everyday conversations. An enhanced understanding of systemic positioning, with particular attention to our sensate responses as we respond to others, opens up a whole new repertoire of positioning opportunities. A frame to consider this multiple dynamic positioning provides some useful orientation points through complex sequences as they unfold and can extend our understanding within conversational interactions. It involves modelling embodied reflexivity in our responses with others, in demonstrating openness and flexibility, sharing and inclusion, as we negotiate our movements with others in the conversational space. Through extending our curiosity further and attending more closely to bodily and embodied data generated moment-by-moment in our interactions, rich places of learning about our self- and relationally reflexive positioning activities unfold, which has significant implications for systemic practice. This inquiry offers one tiny snapshot as a contribution to this complex multi-dimensional area.

## **Reflexive positioning**

Reflexive positioning circles allow systemic practitioners to enhance their repertoire of relationally reflexive conversational movements creating more attuned responsivity within in these processes. Sensate features of interactions and systemic positioning would be a focus of reflection within these circles.

A sensate, collaborative, inclusive, participative, curious ethos is created by asking a set of questions around these areas. This places an emphasis on bodies in interaction and coordination in action, and offers a way of entering the spontaneous living activity that always occurs in meetings without reducing it. We meet people in our bodies. Our bodies are the first meeting place with others (Shotter, 2010). Exploring embodied responses highlights the importance of the body as an intrinsic part of the meaning-making and coordination process.

## **The Metaphor of Rock climbing as a Significant Contribution to the Field of Systemic Inquiry**

The choice of this particular metaphor of the climb is significant; it is personal, and an area I know my way around in one sense and it also embodied relational features of the activity of climbing. This, with all of its challenges, movements, and multiple positions, has huge possibilities and applications when it comes to systemic practices. Its flexibility and malleability and possible applications are many and varied, which in my view outweighs any constraints. I examine some of the problems of staying with this metaphor under the section on alternative approaches I could have taken. The point of using this metaphor there is its wider implication for the application of metaphor as an inquiry tool generally. Metaphor, as demonstrated in this inquiry, can take us into new and unexpected places not previously explored. The use of metaphor to express and articulate an experience or sense of something is also part of everyday talk. However, the significance of metaphor in the systemic practice and therapy field in particular is that it resonates in a far-reaching and accessible way. I have encouraged this in conversation at times, through gently nudging questions that invite a noticing of the senses into the dialogical space: How are you sensing this? What picture or image comes to mind that can take us further into that space and explore it together? Who else would you like to invite into the picture? Each of these metaphors had a resonance for all the participants in those dialogues. This has significant implications for the systemic field, and for anyone working in the people professions, in that metaphor resonates with audiences reaching the parts –

the living, embodied, dynamic, complex flow – that theories alone miss. Its resonance and uniqueness in an everyday sense also fits with practice inquiry.

### **Suggesting Alternative Approaches I Could Have Taken**

I reflect at this stage of the journey that it is the one metaphor I have stuck with; while this may be seen as me being too wedded to it in one way, there is also a sense that I was following it through to establish its use in inquiry. I could have explored different metaphors, perhaps, and there are plenty of embodied metaphors I could have used. This is a point of interest as I move on from this inquiry, and I am exploring it further within the embodied reflexive groups I have set up. I could have been more structured in my dialogue but that would have been more categorical, and I have respected the way that those who gave their consent that I could share their voices and narratives asked not to be ‘boxed in’ or categorised. Therefore I have attempted to portray the dialogue by zooming in on the recursive features of dialogue through particular utterances, embodied noticing and responses within that noticing. The atomic model (CMM) is used to provide a snapshot within the conversations also, and this was a way of transparently making use of it as a tool to freeze where we were in the dialogue and to explore how we moved through.

Although I include some of the post-reflective conversations that were invited, this would have made a research project in itself in terms of our noticing together in a reflective space.

There is only one conversation where I am explicit within the session about the climbing metaphor in exploring my embodied reflexivity; this was so as not to impose a tool on others but to use it to inquire into sensate relational metaphors that fit for others. It has been a useful inquiry tool within my inner dialogue, although this has not always been shared as I did not want to impose my metaphor on others. Instead I have tended to offer other metaphors in a spirit of curiosity, allowing a guiding through to areas not yet considered.

There has been a much more actively collaborative research process, and writing is among the various methods of doing this. I have been curious about the lack of response to joining and adding to the writing in the form of writing, rap, and songs. Young people do not do this for a research project but for the stuff of real life, for example, as graffiti art.

## **Suggestions of Further Avenues for Research**

I would like to elaborate and research further metaphors and their use and scope in inquiry. I am already extending their use as they were offered by families and young people through the course of conversation to create openings. The resourcefulness seems very exciting and enriching and offers a playful and creative way into the complexity of what happens in a dynamic or getting through dilemmas as collective enterprises. Metaphors also become a huge resource in extending reflexivity in the talk and interaction, and I have incorporated metaphor in the frame of the embodied reflexive inquiry groups I have set up. Metaphors bring alive a freshness, uniqueness and novelty also, as each is used in a different way and meaning is made in different ways through being in the dynamic of dialogue. Questioning further the embodied sense with others in these groups is an area I did not take forward in my inquiry. It is an area I would have liked to take further and I think would have enhanced this inquiry. Also there is a gap in that I have not invited different forms of exploring sense-making through sensate activities, the arts and movement, for example, which would also have added to this inquiry. There are further avenues for research, and one I have already started to explore with others is the use of the metaphors people bring to reflexive practice. How do we really get inside this, as living sensate beings, and how do we manage our answerability within it? This has implications for reflective practices across different domains.

## **How these Outcomes Will Be and Are Useful to Others**

I indicate how these outcomes are useful to others in the way that I am using the embodied reflexive frame in group forums with fellow professionals, systemic colleagues and trainees, and social work colleagues to think and feel a way through some practice dilemmas – stuck points – through the use of personal metaphors that have meaning for the individual and me alike in that they can find them around quite freely. These outcomes build on ideas of the body making meaning just by being as opposed to talking about the body, as if consisting only of learned, repeated, habits Gendlin, (1997,2003). He suggests that if we only are able to repeat past habits we remain incapable of anything new. This frame for workshops and conversations counters this idea and reinforces bodily sensations as ‘spontaneous, living, expressive and responsive’ (Shotter, 2010). The body is constantly building upon itself and always in constant interaction with its environment and others in the space.

Highlighted in these workshops is the nature of our orientation as important when we meet each other, and the different postures and stances that invite different interactions. This becomes part of the systemic limbering up I introduce as part of the context setting.

### **My Personal and Professional Learning**

I have learned both personally and professionally from each of the conversations I have had the privilege to be in. Each of these conversations offers unique and rich learning that could be the focus of a separate thesis in itself. I can name only a few given the space restrictions at this point of the thesis, but this does not unfortunately reflect the extent of my learning. Multiple features have come to light through taking an embodied reflexive lens to my practice and also through the writing process.

### **The Process of Writing as a Form of Inquiry**

Valuing the writing process as a form of inquiry has been part of an ongoing learning process for me. I have learned so much from grappling to find words to express experience, and the many different versions I have written reflects this. Every time I write I am reflecting on details of my practice and it gives me both an involved and a separate position towards these activities, like moving between a wide angle and zoom lens on my practice. I have become more practised in this through application, and it has been very helpful also in clinical practice and everyday conversations and consultations in different contexts. The doctoral diaries I have kept throughout the process have extended my reflections on how other areas of my life and interest inform the passions I have in my work. I have reflected in these diaries the connections that come to me while involved in other activities such as running, swimming, walking in the mountains, or listening to music. This is something that I would like to reflect and write more about.

### **Noticing Blind Spots**

I have become more attentive to my blind spots and prejudices; in trying to be collaborative at times I am not always fitting with what people want. Becoming alert to some huge blind spots, for example, required me to look and look again and to keep looking. I also learn all the time from reflecting on what I am sensing and experiencing and inquiring into in the talking space with others. How do I draw on my

different senses, such as smell, which bring forth new noticing and resources and open possibilities for others in our talk? Sharing a private, sensate noticing of pipe smoke and its personal connections for me created an opening for others to share and inquire into different connections through the senses for the parents in primary school in Chapter 2. In my personal life, too, I am noticing these embodied manifestations that have generated different connections.

## **Opportunities for Learning Within Everyday Encounters**

My work on this thesis has highlighted for me the opportunities in learning that every encounter presents, as well as its wider ramifications in learning and education. I thought of how little the educational space had changed from didactic lessons and what might create a different space of learning when there are two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue. I started to ask myself more layered questions about this intercultural encounter that was about to take place. Given that I am in a school space, for instance, how do I create a clearly different experience for Mohamed in this meeting, something that he would recognise as different? What we both bring is knowledge to the relationship, and it is a question of exploring what each knows and what each can enable the other to know more about, fostering self- and relational reflexivity as a climber or actor in the world of getting to know knowing.

## **Attending to Embodied Details**

I am more attentive to the listening space, the breathing, drawing breath to open space, creating and staying with the pause, the rhythms within conversation as people breathing in and out, the tone, the pace of words, what is happening in embodied micro-gestures. I have learned to ask questions to attend to this space more: Where do you listen from? How does it manifest in your body? What are you experiencing in your body? How does this noticing position you in your relationship with others? How will others be affected by your noticing? What new resources will they see you performing?

With Mohamed there was a shift away from discussions of behaviour towards his visual sense, noticing how his body reacted in anger and the resources that he had within himself through exploring the metaphor of colour. This revealed all sorts of abilities and a new narrative. It was novel and new. It provided him with orientation points and opportunities to learn from within experience as we explored the

metaphor together. When he described the experience of our conversation as ‘being in the zone’ I had a felt sense like a warm glow as I joined his smile by beaming back.

### **Holding Tension Points between Being and Doing**

The tension between doing something and being there was something of which I had a felt sense. It is a question of what we do in these moments of tension, when different forces pull or strain us, what Bakhtin (1981) describes as being part of our living world, the tension between the centripetal forces that centralise and unify and the centrifugal forces that decentralise and disunify. This inquiry in many ways is an exploration of this tension and I relate this to the tension of doing and being. I wanted myself to be there with Joe as he expressed the pull of the ‘shoulds’ he felt ‘to do something’. This was also similar to the professionals in the beginning of our conversation, feeling ‘there’s nothing we can do’. The emphasis and expectation I was struggling with at the same time was in response to the term ‘professional expertise’. It suggests also a ‘should’ and an external pull to do something. Performing a being there and seeing this being as a performance of presence was one way I moved through this.

### **The Metaphor**

The metaphor has been a useful orientation through some difficulty areas, and I have been learning to guide people safely into unknown areas and encouraging leadership at the same time. It offered a way for people to express themselves in a way that is less confining in words, extending beyond words to visual imagery, and generating a context for all differences to be appreciated and validated. It was a way of entering into that which is difficult to put into words and is yet embodied and expressed through and in our bodies.

### **Moving through Crux Points**

The crux points for me occur in a conversation in the midst of unfinalisability, polyphony, centripetal and centrifugal forces and answerability (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984; 1986). Bakhtin’s contribution of these concepts, have helped in understanding more of the complex movements intrinsic in the process of sense

making. I have tracked those episodes in conversation where I have been moved, challenged, had a felt sense, a manifestation in an embodied way as something to be worked through.

Noticing movements has been valuable, observed both in myself and others, and I have become far more aware of how am I moving physically in clinical sessions and meetings, whether moving in a way that is mechanical and stiff or relaxed and free-flowing, fidgety, animated, etc.

Learning from the experience of being in the experience itself, learning how to take care as we create opportunities to reach beyond and extend individual and social understanding, involves taking risks and letting go of assumptions.

### **Losing and Regaining Balance**

How do we manage the times that we are caught off balance, in whatever form that takes? This has been a significant question in my own learning about what happens in moments of disconnection, while I am trying to create a bridge for others. Attending to go on and work through the biases sometimes requires a stepping aside, a leaning back to see a bigger picture, deep intakes of breath in the space. The space I am trying to achieve is described by McCarthy (2010) in terms of the fifth province, a space that invites a conversation of the possible, where people feel invited to move with one another co-creatively. McCarthy thinks of it as a place where inconclusiveness in our lives is embraced, where there are no experts only co-travellers, no certainty or righteousness, only various and unknown possibilities. How do I enable going on in the talk at times when I feel a sense of losing balance? What are the questions or moves I have to make to generate dialogue and balance for everyone in these moments?

This is about attending to our disposition and practice, our systemic agility to reposition within conversation to show and maintain being interested, engaged, and present whilst encouraging the engagement of others people. This is the ‘how’ domain, how we are in the flow of interaction in a compassionate way. I have learned a lot about embodied communication within this inquiry process.



## **A Climbing Frame for Inquiring into Embodied Reflexive Practices**

This frame offers ways of deconstructing and looking at embodied features in conversation. This can come indirectly, through video reviews, or directly, in live supervision of practice or within workshop formats with much wider audiences of systemic and other related professionals. Reflexive practices (self and other) can be taught and practiced within such a frame that is designed as experientially focusing on micro-embodied episodes in conversation. It complements other tools such as CMM, and I am already involved in running embodied reflexive practice inquiry groups using this model in consultation and supervision with others. Practice and inquiry function together as an interwoven whole. Each part of the frame invites an exploration of different aspects of practice from an embodied performance perspective.

- Systemic limbering
- Stretching forward
- Inviting multiple positions
- Illuminating blind spots and bringing issues of social difference into view
- Reaching out and making connections
- Letting go
- Entering into and exploring metaphor and exploring bodily knowing
- Learning and action from the conversation
- Moving on together and the direction this took in action

## **Implications for the Future**

The workshops for professionals and supervisions groups described earlier show the different developments stemming from this inquiry. These are ongoing. I offer an outline of an embodied reflexive workshop format which is transferable across different professional groups. I plan to offer this to management and leadership groups also.

I hope to publish some shorter written pieces from this inquiry also. The biggest challenge for me, however, is to take this to a wider research audience, as it is a different type of inquiry that is also very important in its difference. It highlights some glaring, embodied blind spots within the field of research itself, and therefore this feels to me to be a compelling although somewhat daunting commitment I have.

I would like to expand more on embodied answerability and embodied ethics, and also to publish a book, perhaps, as there is so much more to be said and to be introduced into the grammar of embodied reflexive practices and inquiry.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Embodied reflexive workshops***

Embodied reflexive workshops are already up and running, and I propose to offer these more widely to both experienced systemic professionals and in systemic training contexts. I recommend embodied reflexive inquiry activities in the many different forms that can take (as outlined in the previous section) to ensure ongoing rigour in inquiry and in the moves we make as we guide and facilitate dialogue for others.

### ***Privileging bodyful (alongside mindful) practices***

An emphasis on embodied features of practice creates a clearing, a space for noticing embodied features of talking and listening and being listened to. Promoting bodyful practices leads us to inquire how we are in the conversational space, in our waiting, holding pauses, slowing the pace to give time for reflection, attending to micro-features in conversations such as breathing, drawing a breath, leaning in or outwards, facial gestures; all these are part of an embodied attention. All spaces of movement and still points are areas to inquire into within this frame/waiting space, and I recommend this is taken into our everyday practice space with others.

### ***Applying a framework of sequencing moves to examine systemic positioning***

This frame based on sequencing moves is a basic scaffold that is flexible and creative with regard to providing footholds for different vantage points and considerations to be taken in order to explore our systemic positions, moves, inner dialogue and embodied responses. It adds a rigour and curiosity within each piece of the frame that is designed to stretch and expand the horizons of our practice, to question

what informs our positioning, gut reactions, hunches and embodied manifestations. It allows us to remain curious about intuitive movements when our bodily manifestation points to an embodied knowing or uncovers a blind spot or assumption. Questioning how we are informed in different moments, and the different types of knowing that come forth, is about our drive to connect and join with others. It offers a way of using the embodied data as resources to expand different ways of going on in these conversations. This moves us closer to everyday activities as systemic practitioners and the sensate features of self- and relational reflexivity.

### ***Shining a spotlight on metaphor (an everyday aspect of talk) as a valuable inquiry resource***

Close attention to metaphor is recommended in different capacities, including a focus on metaphor within embodied reflexive workshops, in individual and group consultations, in conversations with professionals and in everyday conversations with a diverse range of people in communities. Appreciatively working through a person's choice of metaphor has huge scope and opens embodied relational possibilities and collective learning. Therefore creating invitations to explore these further by entering into the metaphor in detail alongside others can bring forth unlimited rich, varied and valuable resources. It can also extend our embodied understandings and shine a light on ways to go on together that have remained previously unnoticed. The practice of different positions is generated through entering metaphors in an exploratory way, for example as the systemic therapist practitioner moves into a position of being guided through the metaphor and becomes a holder of a systemic curiosity torch to shine the light in new and unseen areas.

### **Looking Towards the Vast Vista Ahead**

I am pointed towards more embodied forms of writing and propose the taking of risks in writing, and this is something I plan to do more of. My learning through the different conversations and text and practice companions who have joined me at different points becomes inscribed as I step forward with purpose, new sensitivities and possibilities. There is a vision of a vast mountain range ahead of possibilities; it is with excitement, a new energy and vigour that I step out and join others in our ongoing journeying.

## Appendix 1 a

### Information

*I am a practicing systemic therapist and practitioner working in a range of settings with children young people and their families and I am currently undertaking practice doctorate research with KCC and University of Bedfordshire. This is a doctoral course for people who are already practicing and experienced in the area of systemic therapy, practice and supervision/training. I have been expected to study something in depth from my work and then write about it so that other systemic practitioners, therapists, students/trainees and supervisors can benefit from my studies.*

*I have been inspired to explore a range of different situations and conversations in schools, neighbourhood and community settings to expand an understanding of the spontaneous emerging happenings and how that was experienced from being inside the conversation. I am interested in inquiring into the here and now aspects of our conversation(s) focusing on moments that have struck me and aspects of our conversation that are difficult to put into words but are experienced in a full bodied verbal and non verbal way. I am using myself as a case study with a particular interest in how we go on together in our conversations and I aim to explore details of moments and my positioning in particular.*

*There is no present goal as such; simply to develop an understanding in relationships and relational practices. I hope that by focusing on small details there could be significant learning in how to be a more responsive practitioner.*

*The focus is on my position and how I am in relation to others in conversation. I would like to invite you to be part of this inquiry. I would like to explore the conversation(s) we have had and the conversations about our conversations. I would like your permission to explore this further and invite you to be part of this inquiry.*

*Before moving onto to consent I would like to be absolutely clear about privacy matters.*

*First of all I would like to ask if it is ok for you to be included in the writing in this inquiry and what would make it more ok to include you in the writing? For example I will go to every length to ensure anonymity and names will be changed and other identifiable features and there may be other ways too that you may have ideas about. I would like you to say anything that doesn't sit right for you or feels uncomfortable in any way and I would like you to be as direct as*

*possible. I will not be disappointed or offended in anything you have to say regarding this and I would appreciate your directness and feedback as important to the study.*

*There will be no reference to your real name, I will use a made up name and this applies to all hand written notes and those kept on the computer. All notes that have been hand written are secured in a password protected directory. The notes kept on my laptop which is password protected is also locked away. When I discuss the writings, I will also use your made up name and not your real name.*

*If you consent to being part of this inquiry and change your mind that is fine and will not affect any of the conversations we have or work we may do together. I will make myself available to discuss anything that crops up for you including questions concerns or queries, at any stage of the process. However there will be a cut off point for example when this becomes a public document.*

*I appreciate the time you have taken to consider this and to discuss it with me and should you have any questions about any of this please contact me by email:*

[h.mahaffey@btinternet.com](mailto:h.mahaffey@btinternet.com)

*Or telephone: 07903762506*

## Appendix 1 b

## Consent agreement form

Please will you cross out or delete yes or no by each question or statement below so that I know what your answer is. Please would you sign your whole name at the bottom of the form? Do call email or text me if you want to go over anything or if you want to or if something bothers you. The form might sound a bit formal but I am just trying to be clear and check you do understand what you are agreeing to. Will you please email this to me at [h.mahaffey@btinternet.com](mailto:h.mahaffey@btinternet.com) from your own email address.

-----

I understand that Helen Mahaffey is doing some research on her own positioning in her work as a therapist as part of her doctoral studies. Yes /No

Helen has explained to me that she would like some writing about our conversations and to include parts of the conversation i/we have had in her and has shown me what she has written yes/No

I am comfortable about what Helen has done to ensure my anonymity Yes/No

She has explained to me that there is never any guarantee that someone might identify me from the writing Yes/No

Helen has told me it is absolutely fine to say to her that I do not want her to make any reference to me in her work Yes/No

She has also made it clear that we can change or edit any descriptions of me or our conversations so that I feel comfortable about what she has written.

I feel ok to discuss any worries I might have about her writing about our conversations so we can come up with a solution Yes /No

I understand that the following group of people will read our conversations. Helen's examiners from Bedfordshire university, her supervisor and consultants to her research other therapists supervisors, trainees and researchers who want to learn more about ways of using writing with people and what it can achieve. Yes/No

I understand that I can say no to any or all of the above and that Helen will not be disappointed in me or cross and that it will not make any difference to any ongoing work that we dare doing together

I understand that there is a cut off point for saying "No" as some things will go into print or be presented at conferences and cannot then be withdrawn

I agree to Helen writing and talking about conversations we have had so other people can benefit from new ways of understanding systemic practice, therapy supervision and training Yes/No

Signed..... Date.....

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